K

MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1958

35 CENTS

DESERT CHASE

a full-length novel by

THURBER JENSEN

Also:

RICHARD DEMING

LAWRENCE BLOCK

C. B. GILFORD

EVERY STORY NEW!

VOL. 6, NO. 7 **MANHUNT** DECEMBER, 1958

CONTENTS

FULL LENGTH NOVEL

DESERT CHASE *by Thurber Jensen* 58

SHORT STORIES

A LITTLE VARIETY *by Richard Hardwick* 1

THE STRANGLER *by Richard Deming* 8

FLOWERS FOR BARNEY *by Ovid Demaris* 24

GIGOLO *by C. B. Gilford* 35

RIDE A WHITE HORSE *by Lawrence Block* 48

WAIT FOR DEATH *by Karl Kramer* 113

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Sheldon felt nothing but hatred for the everlasting sameness of things but now, tonight, he was finally going to get . . .

A LITTLE VARIETY

BY
RICHARD
HARDWICK

It was the everlasting sameness, that was what got under Everett Sheldon's skin. He looked across Purvis' shoulder and out through the windshield. The Sherwood Forest subdivision spread out for miles, like a great cancerous thing that had grown up out of the earth complete with its wide asphalt streets, its new black power holes, granite curbs, and its houses. It was the houses that really got Sheldon. They were—with the exception of a few details—exactly alike. Little boxes packed with tiny rooms, distinguished by the angle of a television aerial, or by a tree in the yard, though that was rare. The colors were really the best way of dis-

tinguishing one from another. They were pink, blue, off-white, tan, and green, and apparently the builders had gone to some pains to insure that no house was the same color as either of its neighbors.

"Just look at them!" Sheldon snorted. "A bunch of Easter eggs!"

"What's eating you?" Purvis said. They were in Purvis' car because it was Tuesday and with six in the car pool each man had the same day each week. Tuesday was Purvis' day.

"Nothing's eating me." He hadn't expected a jerk like Purvis to see it.

Eckert turned and grinned at the men in the back seat. "Maybe Sheldon's afraid he'll get in the wrong house some night!"

"By God, that wouldn't be a bad idea!" Sheldon said, thinking of Pearl. He was damned tired of Pearl. As tired of her as he was of everything else. What he wanted was variety, a release from the same, every-day monotony.

He felt Eckert grinning at him and he turned and gazed out the window at the houses as the car went along the street. In succession, Purvis dropped Perkins, Peeler, Lacy, and then Eckert. Eckert's house was pink, the same as Sheldon's, but there was a tree in the front yard. Maybe that was why they called the place Sherwood Forest, Sheldon reasoned, because one lot in twenty had a scrawny tree on it.

The next stop was for Sheldon.

"Your day tomorrow, Sheldon," Purvis said.

"Christ! I know when it's my day!"

Purvis shrugged and drove away. Sheldon went across the weed-grown yard and in the front door of his house.

"That you, Ev?" Pearl said from the kitchen. In a couple of seconds, after getting no reply, she came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. Sheldon was standing just inside the front door, his lunch pail hanging from one hand. "Ev?" she said, "why didn't you answer?"

"Just who the hell comes in the front door at six o'clock every day? Santa Claus?" He dropped the pail on a chair and stalked into the bedroom. He opened the tiny closet and picked up his boots from beside the double-barrelled shotgun propped in the corner. For the first time that day, a faint smile stole over his face. He sat down on the edge of the bed and took off his work shoes, slipping his feet into the boots. The leather was soft and expensive. The boots did not lace, but fit snugly about his feet and had open tops. He stood and took a couple of steps in each direction across the room, then hitched his trousers up so that the cuffs fell into the open tops of the boots with just the right amount of casualness. He turned each foot, adjusting the trousers till they were perfect, then he went into the kitchen. He felt better with the boots on. There was something now

that separated him from the others. It was his mark of individuality.

"How about a beer?" he said.

"I–I don't think there is any." She stirred something in a bowl, not looking at him.

He stiffened. "*Ain't* any!" He jerked open the refrigerator and peered inside. He moved a few dishes roughly, then slammed the door. "Where the hell did it get to!"

She looked at him quickly. "A couple of the girls came over. Emma and Betty – and, well, we *drank* them."

"You and your goddam friends–" he took a step toward her and she drew back.

"Hear somebody mention my name?"

Sheldon halted and looked toward the back door. Emma Eckert stood there outside the screen. He laughed and went to the door.

"Well, well, if it ain't the little bride!" He opened the door and she stepped inside. As she passed him he let his eyes wander down her body. He wondered if Eckert appreciated what he had there.

"Could you lend me a little coffee, honey," he heard her saying to Pearl. "This is Chip's poker night and he says he can't stay awake without at least three cups with his supper."

"Ain't used to staying up late, is he," Sheldon grinned. The Eckerts had been married only two months.

Emma laughed. "Sorry we drank up your beer, Ev. If I'd thought about it I could have brought a couple from the house with me. We've got a few in the box."

"Don't worry about it. I was going out to get some." He rubbed his hands together. "Anyhow, just look where that beer went!"

Emma ran her hands down the sides of her dress, laughing as she did so. Pearl looked away.

Sheldon waited till Emma had gotten the coffee and gone, watching her as she walked across the four backyards separating Eckert's house from his own, then he went out and got in the car and drove to the store. He brought back two cartons of cold beer. He finished one in the car before he got home and opened another before he put the rest of them in the refrigerator.

Pearl had supper ready, but when she saw him open the beer she put his plate in the oven without saying anything to him. She sat down at the kitchen table and began to eat her own supper.

Sheldon went out on the front stoop and took a deep swallow from the beer can. He sat down on the step and began to think. It was almost dusk, and he looked both ways down the street at the houses stretching away as far as he could see. If there was only something different about his, he would be satisfied. But there wasn't and there wasn't a thing he could do to make it different. At least, not different enough.

He looked down at his boots and

adjusted his trousers again, then he picked up the beer can and finished the beer. He went inside and got another can from the refrigerator.

"Do you have to sit out front and drink?" Pearl asked him. "It—the neighbors—"

"To hell with the neighbors!" he snapped and went back out on the front stoop. He thought about Emma Eckert, about the way her dress seemed molded to her body when she had come into the kitchen. He was certain she hadn't had anything on underneath it. Now there was a woman who was different! A lot of the stuck-up dames around the neighborhood would have blown their tops if he'd talked to them the way he talked to Emma, about Eckert going to bed early and things like that. But not Emma. She was different.

Sheldon looked down the street toward the Eckert's house. Chip Eckert was walking across the yard in the near darkness. He got in the car and backed out into the street and Sheldon remembered that Emma had said he was playing poker tonight. For no reason a little thrill of excitement ran through him. He went in the house for another beer.

Pearl had finished eating and was in the utility room ironing. He could smell the damp, hot cloth odor when he went into the kitchen. The clothes basket was almost full. She'd be at it for some time.

He drank his beer fast, and when he had finished it, he went out the front door and down the street toward the Eckerts' house. There was nothing unusual about a man walking down the street, and even if someone saw him and wondered about it, they could go to hell.

He looked down, but it was too dark to see if his pants cuffs were right or not. He'd just have to take his chances on that. He walked across the yard and knocked at the Eckerts' front door.

Emma came to the screen and looked out. "Ev? Chip's not here. This is poker night, you know."

"I didn't come to see Chip," he said, leaning against the door jamb with his hand. "I came to see you. You owe me a beer."

She laughed. Sheldon liked the way she laughed. "Sure I do! Come on in and I'll get it for you."

He followed her into the kitchen. The house was just as he knew it would be; just like his own. The bedroom there, the bath, closet, and the kitchen. Identical. Some of the furniture was placed differently, but otherwise they were the same.

She took two cold beers from the refrigerator. "Here you are, Ev. One for you and one for Pearl." She held the unopened cans out to him.

"You have Pearl's," he said. "I'll stay and drink it with you."

The smile faded a little on her face. "Okay," she said. She turned and put the beer cans on the kitchen counter, and suddenly she felt

Sheldon's hand on her waist. She whirled, her eyes flashing.

"Alright, buster! That's enough of that!"

He drew his hand back. "Okay. Just a slip of the hand, like they say. Go ahead. Open them."

"Here, you take them with you. You've had about enough anyhow."

She handed him the cans and he pushed by her to the counter and picked up the opener. He opened the two cans and held one out.

"Here. I won't bite."

She hesitated, then smiled and took the beer. "No, I guess you won't." She tilted the can to her mouth and drank. "Hits the spot, huh?"

"Yeah," he said, "and so does this." Before she could pull back he put one arm around her and pulled her roughly to him, forcing his lips down on hers. The beer can fell from her hand. Beer spurted wildly out of the two openings, against the stove, refrigerator, everything. Sheldon released her after a few moments and stepped back, grinning. "Not bad—"

"You lousy creep!" She slapped him across the face as hard as she could swing.

Sheldon stared at her, feeling the burn of his skin. "Why you little bitch—"

But she had seen the danger in his eyes, and had turned. He shot his hand out and grabbed at her, catching the cloth at the back of her dress. The dress ripped down the back and Sheldon saw briefly that he had been right, that there was nothing under the dress but Emma. His other hand clutched her shoulder, whirling her around. He tried to pull her to him again.

"I'll show you it don't pay to fool around with me!" he snapped.

She lashed out at him with her nails, drawing crimson lines down his cheek. He pushed her away, hard, and she slipped in the spilled beer and fell. Her head struck against the corner of the kitchen counter, and she slumped to the floor without another sound.

Sheldon stood over her, breathing heavily. When she failed to move, he knelt beside her. "Emma?" He shook her. "Emma!" He shook her harder, trying not to look at the half-open eyes that stared blankly over his shoulder. *"Get up!"* he commanded. *"Get up!"*

The slamming of the front screen door was like a bomb exploding.

"Emmy? I'm home. The game was called off."

Sheldon recognized Eckert's voice instantly, and quickly he jerked open a drawer beside the sink. The kitchen utensils were in exactly the same place they were in his own house, and he snatched out a long carving knife. When Eckert came through the kitchen door, Sheldon lunged at him, catching him across the forearm with the knife, feeling the blade sink through the flesh. But Eckert was a larger and more powerful man, and when he went

down under the unexpected attack, Sheldon did not stay to press his advantage, but kept going, bursting out the screen door and running up the street as fast as his legs would carry him. He went straight to his closet and got the double-barrel. He knocked Pearl aside as he raced to the back door and latched the screen, then went to the front door and looked out.

"Ev! For God's sake."

"Shut up and get out of my way!" Through the door he saw Eckert coming up the street, running crazily, the knife in his good hand. He reached Sheldon's yard, not stopping.

"You come a foot closer and I'll blast you!" Sheldon screamed.

Eckert came on as if he had not heard, a strange wild sound issuing from his mouth. Sheldon levelled the gun and when Eckert was less than ten yards from him, he fired. First one barrel, then the other. The big man went down, his face a red amorphous thing. He clutched at the grass, twitching, then lay still.

Pearl ran screaming out the back door, stumbling, until neighbors stopped her headlong flight.

Up and down the street there were shouts. Questions. Startled answers. Sheldon looked down at his boots and adjusted his cuffs, then went through the house methodically flicking off lights and locking windows. He got a beer from the refrigerator, shut and locked the back door, got the five boxes of shotgun shells from his closet, and went back to the front room. The sound of sirens was lifted in the evening air, many sirens, all growing louder. The first of the police cars skidded to a halt a block away, the siren dying, lower and lower, until it was soundless. Under the glare of headlights Sheldon watched the uniformed men moving about. He saw neighbors, people he knew and despised, as they talked excitedly to the police.

"Sheldon! Everett Sheldon!" The sound of his name startled him. The loudspeaker went on. *"Come out with your hands up! Come out with your hands up."* A bright spot played across his yard and the front of the house. He moved back away from the door and levelled the gun toward the torn screen and fired. Then he dropped flat against the floor as the answering fire came from the men behind the police cars. His hand felt unconsciously for his boot top as slugs slammed through windows and buried themselves in the pink walls.

He inched toward a broken window, reloading his shotgun as he went. He looked out and saw the lights, lights from hundreds of houses in Sherwood Forest, and as he pumped two more impotent shots at the police car, he felt a strange feeling of satisfaction, for of all the houses in Sherwood Forest, of all the thousands in the entire city, *his* house was at last going to be different!

On The Blotter

Left Flat

When Paul G. Cromwell of San Bernardino, Calif., had a flat tire in Dakota City, Neb., he got out and prepared to walk to his job. He hadn't left the car when two helpful strangers drove up and offered assistance. Then, at gunpoint, they relieved Cromwell of the $72 in his billfold, luggage containing most of his clothes, and the car's spare tire.

Damp Decency

In Corpus Christi, Texas, Patrolman R. C. Kinstley rescued a woman from the bay, then explained why he dived in without removing his pants. "I didn't want to get arrested for indecency. That's a $25 fine."

Canine Carrier

A narcotics peddler in San Francisco has a smart pooch. Agents arrested Quincy Cannon, 48, there recently merely by following his dog. State Inspector Louis Noel said customers would put a bill into the dog's mouth and watch it trot off for home—whence it returned promptly with the narcotics. Tipped off, the agents planted marked money with an informer and then followed the pup.

Cowed

In Dwight, Ill., state police recaptured one of two escapees from the women's reformatory because she was halted by a field of cows. Pearl Elen, 19, was caught shortly after she climbed over a pasture fence after fleeing the reformatory with Shirley Weiland, 26. Miss Weiland, undaunted by the cows, hitchhiked as far as Plainsfield before she too was recaptured.

STATEMENT

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MICHAEL ST. JOHN
Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 4th day of September, 1958.

[SEAL] BLANCHE WADSWORTH, Notary Public
(My commission expires March 12, 1959.)

THE STRANGLER

BY
RICHARD
DEMING

The park bench was barely visible through the fog and the Strangler's face seemed to float through the mist, detached from its body.

At the entrance to Rushboldt Park the upraised hand of a policeman stopped the small coupe. The policeman's hand-light flashed over the press sticker on the windshield, then inside the car onto the face of the young woman driver, a pert brunette in her late twenties with an upturned nose and a flashing smile.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Martin," he said. "Straight ahead to about the center of the park. You can see the glow of lights from here."

"Thanks," Linda Martin said. "I'll find it." She drove on.

The bright glow, which could be seen clear from the edge of the park, came from the spotlights of two radio cars parked on the grass

just off the road. They were focused on a small hollow ringed by about twenty people, a half dozen of them young women and the rest men. Parking her coupe behind one of the squad cars, Linda lifted her camera from the seat beside her and hurried over to the edge of the crowd.

"Whoa, sister," a tall man in a gray topcoat said as she started to push through, holding out a detaining arm. Then he recognized her and said, "Oh, Madam Flashbulb."

He grinned down at her, his plain, prematurely careworn face momentarily becoming youthful. "You can't go any closer until we get our own pictures, Linda."

She peered at the limp form lying in the center of the hollow. The woman lay on her back, her dress bunched around her hips to expose the full length of her thighs, one foot shoeless, the other with a broken heel.

"The strangler again, Sam?" she asked.

Lieutenant Sam Terrill nodded, his grin disappearing and his expression turning bleak. Abruptly he seemed a dozen years older than his bare thirty.

"I think we've got him this time," he said. "A cruising squad car spotted him running from the scene. They lost him in the darkness, but they called for help over the air, and six other cars showed in less than a minute. He couldn't have reached the edge of the park before they got a cordon around it."

Linda Martin swept her gaze over the surrounding area. The killing had taken place nearly at the center of Rushboldt Park, a square, wooded section of winding, poorly-lighted roads. The park was about a half-mile square and was bounded by main streets on all four sides. Dozens of flashlight beams indicated that teams of police officers were combing the entire park.

"He didn't have a car?" Linda asked.

Lieutenant Sam Terrill shrugged. "If he did, the boys must have driven him in a direction away from it. Both cops in the car that spotted him swear no car drove out of the park before the cordon was set up. There are some cars in the park, presumably belonging to the innocent bystanders." With a vague wave of his hand he indicated the dozen people other than police ringing the hollow. "When we sort the cars out, maybe we'll find the one that belongs to the killer."

"How do you know one of the innocent bystanders isn't the strangler?" Linda asked. "Maybe he sneaked back and joined the crowd."

"I think they're all couples," Terrill said. "Parked to do a little necking. I haven't spoted any lone men. We'll check them all, of course, though. Incidentally, your partner's already here."

Glancing in the direction of the lieutenant's pointing thumb, Linda

saw Giles Mathewson talking to one of the policemen a dozen feet away. The gangling reported stood with hands in his topcoat pockets, his eyes hooded as though he were half asleep, but his lips moving steadily as he threw rapid-fire questions at the man in uniform.

Moving over to him, Linda asked, "How'd you get here so fast, Nose?"

The reporter threw her a slow grin. "Hi, Shutterbug. Crack newsmen are supposed to get places fast. How'd you hear about it?"

"Riley at headquarters phoned me the flash. I give him a bottle of Scotch every Christmas. My flat's only six blocks from the park."

The policeman Mathewson had been talking to moved on to order a rubbernecking couple to step farther back. Linda asked, "Find out who the woman is?"

The reporter shook his head. "They haven't searched her yet. They want to get pictures before this mob tramples over all the evidence. So far they haven't done much except hold back the crowd and let an M.E. look at the body."

Moving carefully, studying the ground before him so as not to tread on possible footprints left by the killer, a police photographer approached the body and began taking pictures. He made a dozen flash exposures from various angles, four of the victim and the rest of the surrounding terrain.

Linda snapped two flash pictures of the photographer's activity while this was going on.

When the man had completed his picture taking, he walked over to Lieutenant Sam Terrill. Linda and Mathewson drifted after him.

"You can make out where he crashed through the bushes when the boys chased him off," the photographer told the lieutenant. "But the grass is too thick for footprints. I don't see anything that even looks like a clue."

Sam Terrill grunted and walked over toward the body. Linda and Mathewson started to follow, carefully stepping where the lieutenant stepped. Terrill stopped and looked at them impassively.

"How come your brother didn't tag along?" Mathewson said to Linda, pretending not to notice the lieutenant's expression.

"He wasn't home," Linda said. With a sidewise look at Sam Terrill, she raised her camera and took a closeup of the body.

When he looked exasperated, but failed to speak, she took another.

The lieutenant stopped six feet away from the body. That close, it could be seen that she had been young, attractive and well-dressed. Even as swollen and discolored as her face was from strangulation, it was possible to see that the girl had at one time possessed regular, delicately-carved features.

Sam Terrill asked sarcastically, "Can I get on with police business now?"

Linda smiled at him. "Go right ahead, Lieutenant."

Kneeling next to the dead woman, Terrill methodically searched her pockets and the cloth bag lying next to her. When he rose, he held a driver's license in his hand.

"Monica Carr," he said, reading from the license. "Single, age twenty-two. Occupation, registered nurse. Must be hers, because the physical description fits."

Giles Mathewson was writing in his notebook. Terrill looked at him broodingly.

"Saint Andrew's Hospital at the southeast corner of the park, no doubt," Terrill said. "We'll probably find she came off duty at eleven, and was taking a shortcut home. Why do they keep walking through parks alone after all the publicity about the strangler?"

The reporter shook his head. Circling the corpse, the lieutenant walked over to the bushes the killer had crashed through when the squad car stopped. Carefully he flashed a pocket light over the broken branches, pushed through and examined both the grass and bushes thoroughly. When he returned, he was shaking his head.

"Not so much as a single thread caught on the bushes," he said grumpily. "As usual, nothing. This nut is the luckiest killer I ever heard of." Raising his voice, he called, "Johnson!"

"Yes, sir," a uniformed policeman said, stepping forward.

"Get all these bystanders together," the lieutenant ordered. "Take their names and addresses, and find out what they were doing in the park. Let couples who can alibi each other go home. Any single man who was here alone, hold for me to question."

"Yes, sir,"

"Corbett!" Terrill called.

A man in civilian clothes, carrying a black bag, stepped forward.

"You can cart her off now, Doc," the lieutenant said. "I don't think a complete autopsy is necessary. Just give me time of death, cause, and whether or not there was criminal assault before death. Can I have it tomorrow?"

"I'll have it on your desk by noon," the medical examiner said.

As he moved off, three uniformed policemen approached from the direction of the road. One wore sergeant's stripes, the other two supported between them a disheveled and struggling young man who appeared to be drunk.

"Tommy!" Linda gasped.

The sergeant looked straight at the lieutenant, avoiding Linda's gaze. "We caught him hiding in one of the rest rooms, Lieutenant. Looks like he's our boy."

Tommy Martin had stopped his struggling the moment he saw Linda. A little abashedly he said, "Hello, Sis."

"You let my brother go!" Linda said in a furious voice to the two policemen holding him. "What the

devil do you think you're doing?"

The two men looked uncomfortable, but they retained their grips. Sam Terrill said, "Take it easy, Linda," and motioned for the men to release their holds. Immediately Linda went over and put a protective arm around her younger brother.

"All right, Cooney, let's have it," Terrill said to the sergeant.

"He was hiding in one of the men's rest rooms with the light off, Lieutenant. When I went in and switched it on, he busted past me outside. Joe here brought him down with a flying tackle."

"I was driving through the park, and just stopped there to get sick," Tommy said in a high voice. "I had a couple of drinks too many. The light was off because I couldn't find the damned switch. Can't a guy use a public rest room without having a whole squad of cops jump him?"

"Why'd you run, if you were so innocent?" the sergeant asked.

"Because I was embarrassed. I had to throw up, and I don't like to do it in front of people. I didn't even know you were a cop when you turned on the light. I just wanted to get outside in the dark."

One of the younger officers said in a significant voice, "For a guy so eager to get sick, he held it down pretty well. He didn't pitch his cookies even after I tackled him."

"Take him downtown," Lieutenant Sam Terrill said. "I'll be along to question him as soon as I find out how Johnson made out with the bystanders."

It was nearly two hours later, past one thirty A.M., before Linda had a chance to talk at any length with Sam Terrill again. She spent the two hours sitting on a hard waiting-room bench at headquarters while the lieutenant questioned Tommy in the interrogation room.

She resented not being allowed to sit in on the interrogation, or even being allowed to talk to Tommy beforehand. And Sam Terrill's patient explanation that he was only sticking to regulations failed to mollify her. She stooped to a feminine trick in an attempt to get him to agree.

"You've asked me to marry you three times," she said in a cold tone. "Is this your way of proving your great love?"

He walked away from her without answering.

She considered phoning a lawyer and getting an immediate *habeas corpus,* but on reflection decided against it. She knew Sam Terrill well enough to know he wouldn't attempt to frame Tommy if he were innocent, or any innocent man for that matter. She also knew enough about evidence to realize almost any judge would remand Tommy to jail if she forced an immediate hearing, which would accomplish nothing but causing a lot of people the bother of staying up all night.

Meanwhile Giles Mathewson ran Linda's film over to the *Chronicle* office at the same time he went in to write his own story. When he finished, he came back to headquarters to wait with her, arriving only a few minutes before the lieutenant finally appeared.

Sam Terrill motioned both of them into his office and wearily sank behind his desk. Linda looked at him steadily, her chin held high and her eyes glittering dangerously.

"Well?" she asked.

"He sticks to his story," Terrill said. "Claims he knows nothing about the killing."

"But you think he's lying."

"Let's get one thing straight right now, Linda," the lieutenant said. "You don't think I enjoy booking your brother on a murder charge, do you?"

She said quietly, "You mean you've actually booked him?"

"Yes. On investigation, suspicion of murder. Look, Linda, those two cops swear no car drove away before the cordon was set up. It's dead quiet in that park at night, and they would have been bound to hear the engine, even if the car drove without lights. It's only a quarter mile from the center of the park to the edge in any direction. A short enough distance to hear a car anywhere in the park, but too far for the killer to make it on foot before the place was surrounded."

"Why single out Tommy as a suspect? There were a dozen other people in the park at the time."

"None alone, Linda. Every one of the male bystanders had a girl with him. Tommy was the only lone man."

Giles Mathewson asked, "How good a look did those two cops get of the killer when he ran?"

"Just his back. He wore a dark topcoat and a gray hat. Exactly what Tommy wore. And Tommy *was* hiding. That story about stopping to get sick is plain silly."

"Why?" Linda asked hotly. "He had been drinking. What would be more natural than stopping at a public rest room if he felt sick? Sam, you know Tommy's incapable of committing this sort of crime."

Sam Terrill gazed at her with deep pain in his face. Then he placed his palms flat on the desk and pushed himself erect. Crossing to a file cabinet in the corner of the room, he removed a manila folder. Silently he reseated himself and spread the folder on his desk.

"You know what I think of you, Linda," he said. "I wouldn't deliberately hurt you for the world. But three innocent women have died. I can't let personal feelings influence me."

"What's that folder?" she asked suspiciously.

"Tommy's police record."

"Police record! A couple of speeding charges and a stag-party raid. I know he's a wild kid. But really, Sam!"

"There's an item you don't know

about," Terrill said. "The Nose here and I entered into a conspiracy to keep it from you. It happened two years ago."

"What happened?"

The lieutenant flipped pages. In a toneless voice he read, "October fifth, nineteen fifty-five. Complainant: Miss Alice Moseby, age nineteen, occupation waitress. Accused: Thomas Martin, age twenty-two, occupation none. Charge: attempted rape with force."

Linda stared at him blankly.

"It was one of those borderline things," Terrill said without looking at her. "He picked the girl up in a bar, they had a few drinks, then parked on a side road. Tommy got a little rough, she jumped out of the car and ran to the nearest precinct house. She was hysterical when she arrived, and she swore out the charge."

Linda was silent for a long time. Then she whispered, "Why wasn't it in the papers?"

"Because I talked her into dropping charges, and the Nose sat on the story. It wasn't just because of you, Linda. I honestly thought the kid was getting a raw deal. Any woman who lets a strange man pick her up in a bar, accepts drinks from him, lets him drive her to a secluded spot and then emits an outraged yell when he passes at her, doesn't get much sympathy from me. But our rape laws are cockeyed. He could have gotten five to ten if the girl had stuck to her guns."

Linda sat white-faced and silent.

"See what this record means now, though?" Terrill went on. "With a previous charge of attempted rape behind him, he looks awful guilty. I'm sorry, Linda, but there it is."

Linda rose, her manner that of a sleepwalker. In a colorless voice she said, "I'll bring Tommy a lawyer tomorrow. Goodnight, Sam. Goodnight, Nose."

The story of the latest murder and the arrest of a prime suspect broke in the morning papers, complete with the pictures Linda had taken at the scene. Out of deference to its staff photographer, the *Chronicle* merely presented the facts of the case without embellishment, but even the bare facts were damning to Tommy. The rival papers, while carefully referring to Tommy only as "the alleged killer", by implication convicted him in advance of a trial. They made no bones about their jubilation that the streets would now be safe for womankind.

At noon Linda appeared at headquarters with Harvey Snow, the *Chronicle's* legal advisor. The lawyer made no objection to her sitting in on the conference with his client.

Ordinarily Linda's younger brother was something of an extrovert, but the jam he was in had considerably dampened his spirits. He dropped his eyes ashamedly when his sister and the lawyer were let into his cell.

The conference was brief and, in Linda's judgment, not very satisfying. The gray-haired lawyer asked only two questions.

The first was, "Are you innocent or guilty of this charge, Tommy?"

When the boy insisted he was innocent, Harvey Snow said, "Tell me exactly where you were all evening, and what happened in the park."

Tommy reeled off a list of taverns he had visited, starting about nine o'clock. He said he had left the last one, a place about a mile from Rushboldt Park, at a quarter of eleven, and was taking a shortcut through the park on his way home when he felt ill and stopped his car opposite the rest room where the police found him. He said he had seen no one at all in the park, and was unaware that a manhunt was underway until he was downed by a flying tackle after rushing from the rest room.

On the surface Harvey Snow seemed to accept this statement at face value, but Linda had the feeling this stemmed more from the legal tradition of having faith in your clients than from real conviction.

The lawyer said, "There isn't much we can do until the case goes to the grand jury. There's no bail in first-degree murder. Don't make any further statements of any nature unless I'm present. Not even to declare your innocence. Understand?"

Tommy said, "Yes, sir."

Linda asked a question of her own then. "Tommy, *are* you innocent?"

For the first time since she had entered the cell, he looked directly into her eyes. "You know I am, Sis."

Linda felt a great weight fall from her shoulders. "That's good enough for me, Tommy," she said in a definite tone. "Don't worry. We'll get you out of here."

Outside in the waiting room she asked the lawyer, "What do you think?"

He wagged his head gloomily. "The state has a pretty good case. Entirely circumstantial, of course, so we might get him off on reasonable doubt. Considering the nature of the crime, and the high public feeling about crimes of this sort, I doubt that the district attorney would consider reducing the charge to second degree murder. So he can't plead guilty with a request for clemency."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A not-guilty plea is mandatory in cases punishable by death."

So even his lawyer considered him guilty, Linda thought. Or, at best, that his case was practically indefensible.

LINDA SEPARATED from Harvey Snow in the waiting room and made her way to Sam Terrill's office. She found Giles Mathewson talking to the lieutenant.

"Anything new?" she asked Terrill a trifle coldly.

"A little," he said in a self-conscious voice. "Last night's tentative identification of the girl proved correct. She went off duty at Saint Andrew's at eleven P.M., and obviously was walking home when she was attacked. She lived over on Ruggles, only a block or two from you."

Picking a paper from his desk, he glanced at it. "I got the post mortem report a few minutes ago. Strangulation, as usual. Also there had been no sexual attack, as usual."

Linda took a seat and frowned at the lieutenant. "Isn't that a little peculiar, Sam? In all three cases clothing was disturbed, apparently to make it look as though there had been a sexual attack, but none took place."

Terrill rubbed his square jaw. "The department psychiatrist suggested a kind of far-fetched theory about that once. He said possibly the strangler was impotent."

Giles Mathewson cocked an eyebrow. "Why'd he think that?"

"He didn't exactly think it. He just suggested it as a possibility because of the deranged clothing. His theory was that perhaps the guy attempted rape, became enraged when he couldn't function, and strangled the women because he blamed them for his failure."

"Well, Tommy isn't impotent," Linda said.

Mathewson asked dryly, "How would you know?"

She flushed. "He got in trouble about a year ago. I had to loan him some money to buy the girl off."

Both men were silent. She realized from their expressions that they considered her confession further evidence of her brother's general uselessness, and their united opinion angered her.

"I know I've spoiled Tommy," she said. "I've had to raise him alone since I was sixteen, and that's too young to be a good parent. He doesn't work, he drinks too much and he runs arounds with tramp women. But he didn't kill these women."

Terrill said, "I never put much stock in the psychiatrist's suggestion. I think this killer, whether he's Tommy or someone else, is just a plain psycho."

Mathewson frowned. "What's a plain psycho?"

"An ordinary, run-of-the-mill homicidal maniac. A plain, everyday nut."

The reporter said in a dry tone, "Assuming he isn't Tommy, he doesn't sound so ordinary to me. He's intelligent enough to have pulled three perfect crimes."

"If he isn't Tommy," the lieutenant agreed.

"For the moment let's assume he isn't," Giles Mathewson said. "Does he sound like someone without a mind? Here he's killed three women without leaving a single clue, the

last right under the noses of the police. He not only slipped through their cordon like some kind of wraith, but managed to leave the police a prime suspect in his place. I'd say that makes him pretty clever."

"Nuts are often clever. Are you suggesting Tommy might have been deliberately framed?"

The reported shrugged. "Maybe not deliberately. But it's at least possible the killer took advantage of his presence in the park. You stopped the search after you found Tommy, didn't you?"

Terrill said, "They'd already covered every inch of the park."

"Including the upper branches of trees?" Mathewson asked. "Or the roofs of rest rooms?"

The lieutenant looked uncomfortable.

"Goofed, didn't you, Sam?" the reporter asked pleasantly. "There's a possible defense to suggest to your lawyer, Linda. Incidentally, Sam, why do you think these were psycho kills? You consider Tommy a psycho?"

"If he's guilty, I do," Terrill growled. "Nobody but a maniac goes around strangling strange women."

"How do you know they were strange to him?"

Linda asked quickly, "You mean these may have been planned murders, Nose? There may be some connection between the three women?"

Sam Terrill said sourly, "There's no connection, except they were all young. Naturally we checked that possibility. We can't find any evidence of contact between them, or mutual friends, or even mutual interests. A shop girl, a beauty operator and a nurse, all from different sections of town. They were psycho kills."

Linda said in a slow voice, "I just thought of something which might explain the deranged clothing, but no evidence of rape. Suppose the killer was a woman, and messed up her victims' clothing just to convince the police she was a man."

Both men looked at her. Terrill said, "There weren't any lone women among the bystanders last night. The girls there were all alibied by the men with them. Besides, two cops saw the killer."

"They saw someone in male clothing," Linda said. "In the dark and from the rear. A woman can wear men's clothing."

"Maybe it's a murder team," Mathewson suggested. "A man *and* a woman."

"Oh, stop reaching for left field," the lieutenant said impatiently.

Linda said, "I know what would prove Tommy's innocence."

When the men glanced at her, she said, "Another murder attempt while he's in jail."

Sam Terrill frowned. Mathewson said, "If he's as clever as he's been up to now—assuming he's

someone other than Tommy—he'll lay low now that Tommy's nominated to take the rap for him."

"Can he quit, if he's the homicidal maniac Sam seems to think?" Linda asked, rising. "Maybe he couldn't resist it if he ran into another young woman in a lonely spot."

Sam Terrill examined the sudden light in Linda's eyes and asked suspiciously, "You're not thinking of walking around dark alleys at night in the hope of proving Tommy innocent at the expense of getting yourself killed, are you?"

"Only defenseless women get killed in dark alleys," she told him. "I have a gun and a permit to carry it. A holdover from the Primus investigation, when the *Chronicle* got all those threatening letters. I've never carried the thing, even during the Primus affair, but I can."

Pushing himself up from the desk, the lieutenant said, "That's out, Linda. I won't let you make a decoy of yourself."

"What makes you think I need your permission?" she asked with a dazzling smile. "It seems to me, Lieutenant I'm old enough to make my own decisions."

She walked out of the office, leaving both men frowning after her.

That night Linda put her plan into operation. Placing in her purse the small pearl-handled automatic she had never fired, she spent the two hours from ten to midnight walking up one dark street and down another. All three murders had occurred during those hours, although in different sections of town. As it would have been too discouraging to think of the vast area of the city, and the improbability of her meeting the strangler even if he happened to be prowling, she resolutely thrust this thought from her mind.

Aside from a carload of teen-age boys trying to pick her up, nothing happened the first night.

She tried again the next night, taking a different section of town. A man honked at her from a passing car, and another, on foot, whistled at her from across the street, but no one approached her. Twice she did have the feeling she was being followed, but when she ducked into doorways and waited, no one appeared. A week passed with nothing more eventful happening.

Daily she visited Tommy's cell, stopping to talk to Sam Terrill on the way out. He told her the indictment against Tommy was going to the grand jury the following week, but never inquired if she were carrying out her threat to act as a decoy. This puzzled her a little, for she expected the question, and was prepared to freeze him with a request that he mind his own business.

Giles Mathewson never mentioned the subject either, which also bothered her. While she had no intention of accepting the advice

of either man, she resented what she took to be their indifference to the dangerous game she was playing.

She particularly wondered why Sam Terrill failed to show any curiosity. After all, he had on three separate occasions asked her to marry him, and it was a little unsettling for a girl to have a man who presumably loved her show so little concern for her safety.

IT RAINED all day the Monday of the second week Linda set herself up as a decoy. Early in the evening the rain stopped and a fog settled over the town. By ten P.M., when she left her flat, the fog was so thick the street lamps were barely visible from a few feet away. Linda was discouraged. With so many dark streets to cover, the prospect of encountering the strangler, even if he were prowling the city in search of a victim, seemed incalculably remote.

Up to now, she had deliberately by-passed the areas where the three murders had taken place. The pattern of the killings indicated the strangler avoided locations where he had once struck. Tonight she wandered aimlessly up and down the side streets near her own home until she found herself at one of the entrances to Rushboldt Park.

She hesitated, feeling certain it would be a waste of time to try the park. But she went in anyway deciding to take a shortcut to a section of narrow streets beyond Saint Andrew's Hospital.

No cars were parked along the winding road tonight, the latest murder having made the place unpopular as a lover's lane even though the strangler was presumably in jail. The gray shroud of fog completely isolated her from the rest of the city.

As she neared the center point of the park, the same feeling she had experienced on previous nights crept over her: a sense of being followed. She halted to listen, but no sound came from behind her. The feeling gained in intensity, a thing of intuition rather than experience. She could neither see nor hear anyone. Linda stepped off the road onto the wet grass and waited, her heart suddenly in her throat.

In her imagination something seemed to circle her in a wide arc, moving silently among the trees lining the road until finally it was ahead of her. Again it was purely intuition, no sound disturbed the stillness. Yet she could follow exactly the stalker's invisible progress in her imagination.

She sensed that the something or someone had completed the half circle and had halted a hundred feet beyond, waiting.

A fit of trembling seized her. She almost broke and ran back the way she had come. Then she steeled herself with the admonition that it was probably only the fog playing tricks with her imagination, that really

she was alone in the park. Even if she weren't, she reminded herself, this was the situation she had hoped to encounter.

Snapping open her purse, her fingers closed about the cold butt of the little automatic. Cautiously, Linda moved on, sticking to the grass shoulder of the road so that her feet made no sound. Every few yards she stopped to listen.

She had gone perhaps a hundred feet and halted for the fourth time, when she made out the obscure shape of a bench just ahead. Her pulse gave a violent leap when she saw the dim outline of a man seated on it.

She stood completely still, her heart hammering. The man's profile was toward her, and gradually the pounding of her pulse stilled as she realized he seemed totally unaware of her presence.

Then a match flared, cupped hands held it to a cigarette, and the bright glow etched the man's features in bold relief.

Linda said, "Nose!"

Giles Mathewson jerked spasmodically, his hat fell off. As Linda snapped shut her purse and moved toward him, he rose and stared at her.

When she got close enough for him to recognize her, he said in a relieved tone, "Oh, it's you, Shutterbug."

Then he stooped to pick up his hat, set it on his head and growled, "Do you have to sneak up on people like that? I just lost an inch of growth."

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just sitting. Cigarette?"

His fingers were still trembling from the scare she had given him when he offered the pack. Linda took one, waited for a light, then examined the reporter suspiciously.

"Have you been following me, Nose?"

"Me? Of course not."

"You have, too," she accused. "I think you've been following me every night. You circled around me to this bench."

"Why in the devil would I follow you?" he inquired. "For your information, I've been sitting on this bench nearly an hour."

"Oh," she said puzzled. "I thought perhaps you had appointed yourself my bodyguard because I said I was going to try to lure the strangler into another attack."

He drew on his cigarette, the glow lighting his angular face. "You don't need a bodyguard. The strangler wouldn't jump you."

"What do you mean, he wouldn't jump me?"

He was silent for a minute. Then he said, "I mean why don't you go home? There isn't any strangler out there."

It was Linda's turn to be silent. Finally she said, "You mean you think it really was Tommy?"

"I didn't say that," he said impatiently. He tossed away his ciga-

rette. "Maybe I did mean it. Why don't you go home and forget it?"

"Tommy didn't kill those women," she said hotly. "He isn't a maniac."

"Who said the strangler's a maniac?"

"Of course he's a maniac. No normal man goes around killing strange women."

"Maybe he had a reason."

Dropping her cigarette, she angrily ground it out. "A madman's reason, you mean? Some kind of perverted revenge because he's impotent?"

"He isn't impotent!"

The words cracked out like a pistol shot, stunning Linda into silence. The two of them stared at each other, neither speaking for a long time.

Giles Mathewson emitted a forced laugh. "What a silly argument. Go on home and leave me alone, Shutterbug."

Linda made no move. She continued to stare at him. Presently she said in a painfully slow voice. "You were on the scene awfully quick the other night, Nose. With no one to alibi you. And you wore a dark topcoat and gray hat. Everybody assumed you'd been let through the cordon. There was no order to keep authorized people out of the park; only to keep people from leaving. I wonder if a check of the policemen on duty might show that *no one* passed you in."

In the fog his face was an expressionless blur, impossible to read. If he had shown anger, or indignation, or had laughed in her face, it might have convinced her that she was wrong. But when he spoke, after nearly a minute of dead silence, it was in a husky, almost pleading tone.

"Five years we've worked as a team, Shutterbug. How many times have you been alone with me? If I was a killer, wouldn't you be dead long ago? Look at us now. Isolated. Nobody would hear your screams. But am I strangling you? I'm just telling you to go home."

"Yes," Linda said in the same slow voice. "You told me a few minutes ago the strangler wouldn't jump me. Because his friends are safe from him, aren't they, Nose? He only kills strange women. How long have you been impotent, Giles?"

"Don't say that!" he yelled at her.

She backed a pace, in revulsion rather than in fear. Even face-to-face with a madman, it's hard to fear someone you've known and liked and worked with for years. It didn't even occur to her to reach for the gun in her purse.

Again there was a long silence. Though she could barely see him in the fog, she could almost feel his mind working. When he finally spoke, she knew he had decided it was hopeless to try to convince her of his innocence now. His tone was one of naked appeal.

"Listen," he whispered. "We're

a team, aren't we? We're friends, Linda. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. It'll never happen again. I swear it. Why do you think I've been sitting out here every night?"

Linda said nothing.

"Nobody comes here at night since the killing," he said. "Don't you see I'm conquering it? Nothing can happen when I sit here alone."

His words made her tremble with an odd mixture of loathing and pity. That was the explanation for his long vigil in the park. He felt that by isolating himself from temptation, he could suppress his terrible compulsion.

"Let me take you to a doctor, Nose," she said gently. "Tonight. Right now. This way will work only until the next time you see a strange woman alone some night. Then you'll have to prove your manhood again."

"Stop talking about my manhood!" he shouted. "Do I have to convince you I'm a man?"

She backed another pace, but not quickly enough. Leaping forward, he grasped her shoulders and shook her fiercely. The transformation from the gentle-mannered man she knew to a raving maniac was too abrupt. She stared at him incredulously.

"I am a man!" he screamed into her face. "Just because I've never passed at you doesn't make me impotent. I'll show you!"

Hurling her to the ground, he threw himself on top of her pressing her shoulders into the grass. Her purse was flung beyond reach.

"Nose!" she pleaded. Her voice trembling so that she barely got the words out. "Stop! It's me, Linda. Oh God!"

But he was beyond hearing her. He tore at her clothing, ripping her dress down to her waist, and when she struggled, his hands suddenly shifted to her throat. She clawed at his wrists, but his grip was like a steel vice. Slowly it tightened until her lungs were on the verge of bursting.

Then, suddenly it was over. She was gulping in huge breaths of air. Staring upward, she dimly made out three struggling figures. The struggle abruptly ended with the metallic click of handcuffs.

Hands helped her to her feet, then she was sobbing against the chest of Lieutenant Terrill. Off to one side the handcuffed Giles Mathewson was in the grip of a second plain-clothes man.

Rhythmically, the lieutenant patted her back. "It's all right now. We should have moved in sooner, but we needed airtight evidence. It's all right. Don't cry. You were never in any danger. We've been right behind you all along."

Gradually her sobs subsided enough for her to ask, "Was it you following me all week, Sam?"

"Sure," he said. "Both you and the Nose have been under twenty-four hour surveillance ever since

you announced your intention of making yourself a sitting duck. On your night prowls I've been tailing you personally."

Linda looked toward the fog-obscured outlines of the other detective and the manacled killer and shuddered. "You've been having Giles tailed too, Sam? How did you suspect him?"

"He seemed a little too proud of the killer's cleverness," the lieutenant said. "And a little too resentful of my calling him a plain nut. Maniacs usually are touchy about being called mad, you know. It got me to wondering, so I checked all the men who were part of the cordon that night. No one remembered passing him into the park."

Linda lowered her head to his chest again. "Oh, Sam, I thought I was so brave and smart to go after the strangler alone. But I wasn't brave when his hands went around my throat. I was scared silly. I wasn't smart either. I stood there with a gun in my purse, and didn't even reach for it. I just talked to him as though he was still a good friend."

"I know," he told her. "You haven't sense enough to be allowed out alone. You need a boss, someone you'd have to take orders from."

"If that's an offer of a policewoman's job, the answer is no," Linda mumbled into the front of his coat. "If it's an offer of the same job you've mentioned before, I think I'll take you up."

FLOWERS FOR BARNEY

BY
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DEMARIS

AT SEVEN o'clock that evening Barney Lester decided not to wait any longer and poured himself a martini. He sat on the tall slim stool before the leather upholstered bar and stared at the delicate crystal glass in his huge soft hand. Slowly, he raised the glass and let the cool liquid trickle down his throat. Then he reached over and refilled it. There was a movie magazine on the counter top and he found himself glaring at the pouting image of Gloria Miles on the cover.

"You bitch," he said aloud. "You're not gonna ditch me now.

The stocky one was really grinning now as Gloria struggled against him. "Crazy, man," he giggled. "This chick's loaded."

Not while you're on top and I'm down and out."

This idea had become obsessive with him in the last few months, possessing every moment of his waking hours. He knew he was losing his hold on her and that his position had now become critical. She had to be made to realize his importance to her. Things had been particularly bad during the past three weeks because Gloria was starring in a major production. It took up all of her time. But Barney knew there was a lot more to it. For one thing, Gloria had grown cold to him a long time ago. They had had separate bedrooms for years, and the only time he saw her was in the evenings when she came home and they had a drink together. The drink routine had become almost a concession on her part, a last remnant of relations, and he knew that when it stopped there would be nothing left for him in that big rambling house.

After the drink, Gloria always retired to her bedroom, where she had her supper brought in and supposedly rehearsed her lines for the next day's shooting.

Rock Taylor, her present leading man, came more and more often in the evenings to rehearse with her, and the two of them would lock themselves up in her bedroom for hours. Barney could hear them laugh at times, and the sound of their voices was like the turning of a knife in his chest. At those times, he would drink himself into unconsciousness. The next morning they were both gone when he got up and he never really knew whether Rock had spent the night or not.

Barney picked up the magazine and carefully studied the pouting expression. It was the only authentic thing left of the former Edna Nowicki—the sixteen year old girl he had found in a San Diego cannery in 1942. She had traveled a long way and had learned plenty in fifteen years. But the expression still reminded him of the kid with the mouse colored hair and the figure of a Greek goddess. He shook his head sadly. How that expression had irritated him in the old days. It had made her look so stupid and vacuous. He thumbed through the magazine, stopping at the article about her. There were more pictures, but no matter what seductive position she assumed, the pouting expression was there staring out at him. The studio boys had capitalized on that expression, turning it into a high voltage sex message. It wasn't like the old days, when he had associated it with some banal remark or inane question. Yes, he thought, Edna Nowicki, had come a long way.

During moments like these, Barney was perceptive enough to realize his own situation. He knew he wasn't the typical movie colony husband. But what he wouldn't admit to himself was that he was an unemployed ex-pug with badly flat-

tened features and bulging muscles that had turned to mush. His weight had climbed from a hundred and ninety, when he had been in his prime, to over two hundred and forty. The hair on top of his head had completely vanished and what was left at the sides was turning a dirty grey.

In the old days, Barney had supported her with his fists. He had fought semi-finals in the heavyweight class throughout the Southwest. It was at the peak of his career in 1943, when he was twenty-eight, that the Navy drafted him. That was just seven months after their marriage. As much as Barney had hated abandoning his boxing career, he had hated even more the thought of leaving Edna. She had cried, he remembered, but she had never written him a single line. He lost all track of her for two years, while serving in the South Pacific. Then one day he picked up a magazine and there she was on the cover, pouting at him, her mouse colored hair now platinum blond, her teeth an even white line between full scarlet lips. It was then that he first learned she had changed her name to Gloria Miles. Barney kept the magazine, looking at it every free moment he had. At first he found it exciting to be married to such a luscious doll. But after a while, doubt set in and he began to worry about the photographer. After all, Edna had posed in the nude. Hell, how could a man stand looking at a body like that without getting ideas and trying something. He wrote to the magazine inquiring about his wife but never received an answer.

By the time he was separated from the service, Edna (or rather Gloria Miles as she was then known) was already an aspiring starlet with one of the biggest studios in Hollywood. Barney found her and moved in. That had been ten years ago, and Barney had not done a lick of work in all that time. Meanwhile, Gloria's career spiralled right to the top. She was now one of the big-ten box office attractions.

Barney glanced at his watch and scowled. It was seven-thirty and still no Gloria. Suddenly, he pitched the magazine across the room and nearly fell off his stool. What a bitch she was. He drained another martini and angrily wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

He had to think of something quick or he would be out on the street. But what? What could he possibly do that would make her want him again?

Then he heard the front door open and close and he grew tense. He wanted to turn and watch her entrance. See the famous hips undulate, the full breasts swing freely under the tight cashmere sweater. But instead he refilled his glass and stared at it, fine beads of perspiration breaking out on top of his bald head.

"Pour me one, darling," she said,

coming up behind him. "I really need it. I'm bushed."

"What kept you?" he asked, reaching over for the pitcher, trying to control the edge in his voice.

"Oh, another stupid story conference," she said, taking the drink from him and climbing up on a stool, carefully crossing her shapely legs. "My God, that jackass Nelson gave me the most hideous dialogue. Makes me sound absolutely sterile."

"Ain't that what you're supposed to be?"

"My God, don't be silly. I could never be sterile."

"Listen," Barney said, ashamed of the whine in his voice. "How about the two of us having dinner together tonight? You know, like old times."

"That would be divine," she said, her pink tongue darting out to sample the drink, the pouting expression suddenly and terrifically seductive. "But I can't, darling. Rock is coming over to rehearse."

"Again. That guy is here every night."

"But I've got to rehearse, darling. They depend on me at the studio."

"Damnit, I know. But what about me. What the hell am I? A damned houseboy?"

"Don't shout," she said, slowly sipping the drink. "You know I've got to rehearse."

"I know, but can't you give me a break once in a while?"

"Are you complaining?"

"Well, damnit, why can't you think of me once in a while. I'm human, too, you know."

"Don't be silly," she laughed.

"Who's being silly. I'm just asking for my wife to have dinner with me. Hell, you'd think I was asking you to go to bed, or something."

"Now, you are silly."

"Yeah, I guess so," he admitted. "That would be pretty silly for your husband to take you to bed."

"I don't like the sound of that crack," she said, tossing her head back, the pouting expression freezing on her face. "If you don't like it around here, you know what you can do."

"Oh, no," he said. "It's not gonna be that easy. I'm not leaving ever. You want to get rid of me you'll have to take it to court. Maybe, I can give your loving public something to think about. You can bet your million dollar fanny on that."

"Don't be too sure of yourself. I might just do that little thing one of these days."

"You do and you'll be sorry," he whined, knowing that the argument was getting out of hand, the fear almost a sickness in the pit of his stomach.

She studied him calmly. "Why don't you go out and work. You've been free loading off me for ten years."

"Free loading, am I? How about the years you free loaded off me. How about all those allotment checks and not even a lousy post-

card to say how-do-you-do or kiss-my-you-know-what."

She slipped off the stool and stood looking at him, her eyes half veiled by the mascaraed lids. "You're a no good son-of-a-bitch," she said, turning on her heels and marching out of the room.

Barney stayed on the bar stool for a while, trying to control the anger boiling inside of him. Suddenly, he slammed his fist against the bartop, wincing with the pain. "You bitch!" he cried to the empty room. Then he jumped off the stool and ran out of the house. He knew he had to get out or he would kill her.

As soon as Barney drove the Cadillac out of the garage, he felt better. He would go to some quiet bar somewhere and think. There had to be an answer somewhere.

He drove down Sunset all the way to Hollywood. It felt good riding with all the windows open, the soft evening air brushing against his hot perspiring face. He had almost forgotten about the quarrel when he caught the swift blur of motion to his left. Then he heard the sudden shrill yell of brakes and the rending cry of ripping steel, and felt the jarring impact of collision as the big Cad skidded out of control, bouncing to a stop against the curb. The impact sent Barney sliding across the seat and he lay now with his head against the right hand door. The fear that he had felt at the moment of contact was quickly replaced by anger when he found that he was unharmed.

He sat up and threw the door open, bounding out of the car. The Mercury stood diagonally across the boulevard and Barney noticed that water was dripping out of the radiator. "The stupid sonofabitch," he thought. "Must have gone through a stop signal."

Two teen-agers stood in front of the Mercury, examining the damage to the radiator when Barney got there.

"Who the hell was driving this heap?" Barney demanded, spinning one of the boys around with a huge hand.

"Hey, what's with you, man?" the boy asked, grinning foolishly.

"You hit my car," Barney shouted, the grin increasing his irritation.

"Cool down, man. You're gonna bust a valve," the other one said, turning around to face Barney. He also was grinning.

"What's with this square, man," the first one asked, ignoring Barney. "Man, he blows too much."

"Yeah, man. He's nowhere," the other one agreed, grinning at Barney.

"One more crack and I'm gonna lay you out," Barney threatened, lowering his voice. A crowd was gathering and Barney looked around quickly, hoping he could get a witness. "Anybody see the accident?" he called out, but no one answered. They just pushed

up closer for a better look at the damaged automobiles.

Barney turned his attention back to the two boys. They stood slightly apart, grinning at him, completely at ease, not at all frightened by the threat. One of them was tall with very long arms and narrow shoulders. The other was average height and stocky. They both wore their hair long in ducktail fashion. Barney looked at them more closely now noting the tight fitting levis, the heavy clod hopper boots, the blue T-shirts and wide leather belts. They were a type you read about in the newspaper every day. The hopped up kids with the cut-down jalopies and the strong arm approach, usually with a six-inch blade tucked securely in a willing hand.

Barney decided to change his tactics. He went around to the back of the Mercury to see what street they had come out of. "Hey," he called. "There's a stop sign on that street. Didn't you see it?"

"I don't see no sign, man," the tall one said, walking up to Barney.

"Well, there's one there," Barney said.

"That's crazy, man," the stocky one laughed.

"Let me see your driver's license?" Barney said, holding out his hand.

"Screw..." the tall one started to say but then he spotted the traffic cop approaching. "Play it cool, man," he warned, his voice low and threatening. "Real cool."

From then on the policeman took over and the tall kid produced his driver's license. He didn't have insurance and the policeman explained about the financial responsibility law, telling him that unless he was able to pay for the damage to Barney's car he would lose his driver's license and his car would be impounded.

They listened, still grinning, and never spoke a word until the policeman had left. Then they walked across the street and stood grinning at Barney's car.

"Man, dig that square job."

"Yeah, man. That's the squarest."

"Well, what about it?" Barney asked. "Are you gonna pay for this damage?"

"Look, man. Let me tell you something," the tall one said. "I don't dig this jazz, man. That financial jazz is nowhere, man. Nowhere."

"I don't give a damn what you dig," Barney said, getting angry again. "I want to know if you're gonna pay. Yes or no."

The stocky one shook his head sadly. "Man, you are square."

"Look," Barney said. "I've got your license number and your name and address. I'll let the state take care of it if that's the way you want it."

"I've got your name and address, too, man. Remember that, man."

And they both turned around and dragged their heavy boots across the street to their own car,

which was still blocking traffic. They slouched into it and slowly drove across the street to a nearby service station. Barney examined the Caddy. The rear fender and part of the trunk were damaged. Gloria would blow her top. Damnit, things like that were always happening to him. If there was one jerk in all of California without insurance, he was sure to hit Barney.

Barney kicked the rear tire angrily and got back into the car and drove off. Now he really needed that drink. Those little punks had upset him and he didn't know why. They were just a couple of punk kids. He could have cleaned up the street with them. And yet he wondered about it. There was something about them that was frightening. A sort of reckless viciousness that you couldn't help feeling when you stood next to them.

There was a small neighborhood type bar a couple of blocks south of Sunset and Barney drove over there. The place was almost empty when he went in and he decided to sit at a booth. He had to have some peace and quiet to think this thing out. The waitress brought him a double scotch and soda and he sat back and lighted a cigarette. Now, what the hell could he do about Gloria. What could he do to convince her he was more of a man than that prissy Rock Taylor. He had four drinks and still no idea came to him. It was with the fifth drink that he struck paydirt. It was so simple, he wanted to laugh. Why hadn't he thought about it before. It was perfect.

Quickly he stood up and staggered out of the bar. He had the address on a small slip of paper in his coat pocket. The house was on the East side of the river and in the middle of the industrial district. Barney parked the Cad in front of the house and lighted another cigarette. He had to be careful now.

It was three o'clock when the Mercury drove up and parked in front of him. The tall one was alone now and he came up to the Cad, leaning forward, resting his elbows against the door, grinning.

"Hey, man, what gives?"

"I've got a proposition for you," Barney said, offering him a cigarette. He took the cigarette and waited for Barney to light it.

"Go on, man. Blow."

Barney hesitated a moment as he stared at the grinning face. Maybe the idea wasn't good as he had thought.

"Hey, man, get with the jazz."

"Well," Barney said. "I'm married to Gloria Miles."

"Crazy!"

"But I am. All I want you and your buddy to do is play a little joke for me and I'll forget all about the accident."

"Blow, man."

"Look, there's a character by the name of Rock Taylor who hangs around the house all the time. I just

want you guys to spook him. You know, make believe you're gonna rob the place and scare the hell out of him. Then I'll get into action and scare you guys off. See what I mean?"

"Crazy."

"Well, what do you say. I'll forget all about the accident. There must be at least three hundred dollars worth of damage to my car."

"You're on, man."

Barney smiled. It had been easier than he had thought.

It was eight days later before Barney put the plan into operation. He had waited for the exact moment. The servants were out and Rock Taylor was in the bedroom with Gloria.

At a quarter to ten that night, Barney knocked on Gloria's bedroom and requested that they both come into the living room. He had something he wanted to discuss, he said. Something of great importance to all concerned.

In the living room, Barney went to the bar and slowly mixed himself a drink. Rock Taylor slouched in a chair, his chin resting against tightly clenched fists. Gloria sat on the arm of his chair.

"Can I fix you something?" Barney asked, trying to keep his voice natural.

"Never mind that," Gloria said. "What's on your mind? We've got a lot of work to do tonight."

"I'll bet you have," Barney said, turning around to face them.

Gloria threw Taylor a quick glance and stood up. "I've taken all I'm going to take from you," she said, slowly walking up to him. "You can get the hell out of this house. Understand! Get out and stay out!"

"I'm not going anywhere," Barney said. "I'm your husband, remember?"

"You're nothing," she said. "A big fat zero."

"Getting pretty brave, ain't you?"

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," she said. "There's nothing you can do to me now."

"Oh, yeah. Think you're too big to get hurt?"

"You bet your filthy hide. You can't touch me."

"You're bluffing," he said, suddenly worried. What if those punks didn't show up. He'd really be in a mess.

"Go on and tell your little stories."

"Yeah. How about Q.T. Magazine. They'll jump at the chance."

Taylor raised his head and glared at Barney. "You miserable bastard," he said.

"You shut up," Barney shouted. "Before I bust you one."

Taylor smiled tightly and started to get up when the front door flew open and the two teen-age punks came into the room, grinning, six-inch blades held menacingly before them.

"Greetings, cats," the tall one shouted as they crossed the room.

Barney smiled inwardly. Now we'll see how tough Taylor really is, he thought.

"Hey, man! Dig that crazy chick," the stocky one cried, running up and grabbing Gloria by the arm.

"She's a gasser," the tall one agreed.

"Don't you touch me," Gloria cried, trying to break the hold.

Rock Taylor tried to get out of the chair, but the tall one pressed the knife against his chest, pushing him back into the chair.

"Keep cool, man," he grinned.

The stocky one was really grinning now as Gloria struggled against him. "Crazy, man," he giggled. "This chick's loaded."

"You leave her alone," Barney ordered, stepping toward the stocky one.

"Get back there, pop," the stocky one said, pressing the knife blade against Gloria's side. "On the sofa, man."

Barney scowled and slowly went to the sofa and sat down.

"How about a ball, man," the stocky one said, pulling at Gloria's sweater, his hand brushing roughly against her breasts. "This chick's the most." And he pressed the knife into her side until she screamed with the pain.

Taylor's face had turned a deathly white, his eyes never leaving Gloria. "What do you guys want?"

"A ball, man. A ball."

"Look. I've got seven hundred dollars on me. You can have all of it if you promise to leave Miss Miles alone."

The tall one laughed and held out his hand. Taylor quickly took out his wallet and handed him all his money. "Crazy," he said, flashing the money to the stocky one before slipping it into his pocket.

"Okay, chick," the stocky one said. "Skin down."

Taylor looked wildly around the room. "You said you were gonna leave her alone."

"Shut up," the tall one said, feigning a pass with his knife.

"That's enough," Barney shouted, standing up. "You punks get the hell out of here."

"Man," the tall one said. "You better sit down."

"Skin," the stocky one repeated, roughly pulling her sweater over her head. She wore nothing under the sweater and Barney gasped when he saw the rich fullness of her breasts, reminded once more of their startling beauty.

"Okay, chick," the tall one said. "Skin the skirt."

She tried to pull away and the stocky one brought the knife to rest against one of her breasts. "Skin," he said. "It's a sharp blade."

She started to cry then, her lower lip trembling, the blue mascara running down her cheeks.

"Listen, man," the tall one said. "I've got the craziest yet. These two cats make love in the movies; so, now, how about the real thing."

"Crazy."

"Okay, man," the tall one said to Taylor. "Skin down."

"You're insane," Taylor whispered hoarsely, the muscles around his jawline tightly drawn.

The tall one brought the knife to rest just under his chin. "Skin, man. Skin!"

Taylor stood up and he looked like he was about to cry. "I gave you my money," he whined. "What more do you want?"

"Skin," the tall one repeated, suddenly running the knife against the side of Taylor's face, drawing blood. Taylor screamed, his hands frantically going up to his face.

"You've disfigured me," he sobbed, his fingers tremblingly tracing the knife cut.

Barney was worried now. This was not what he had wanted. The punks seemed to be hopped up or something. He'd have to do something and do it quick before they went completely crazy.

"Okay, you punks. I'm gonna take you right now," he said, standing up.

"Man, you crazy? You want this chick to swallow this blade? Do you, man?" Gloria screamed as he pressed the blade against the soft white skin of her stomach, just above the waistband of her skirt. "All the way, man," the stocky one threatened.

Barney stopped and stared at him. He knew the punk meant every word he said. "You boys are way out of line," he said, slowly stepping toward the stocky one. "You know that, don't you. You guys are headed right for the gas chamber."

"Stow the gas, man," the stocky one said, still grinning, the knife pressed deeper into her stomach, the other hand just under her breast. Gloria stared at Barney, close to hysteria.

"What are you guys?" Barney asked. "Hopped up?"

"Yeah, man. It's the living end."

"Look," Barney said, trying to be reasonable. "You've had your fun. Now beat it."

The stocky one shook his head sadly. "Man, you are square."

"Let's get on with the ball, man," the tall one said.

"I'm for that, man," the stocky one said, pulling at her skirt. "Skin chick. Let's go."

"You, too, square," the tall one said, running the knife against the front of Taylor's shirt. Taylor started unbuttoning the shirt, his fingers nervously struggling with the buttons.

It was then that Barney jumped the stocky one, his huge hand slapping against his chest, knocking him sideways. Barney spun around to face the tall one, but he was too late. He felt the hot piercing plunge of the switchblade sink into his guts, feeling every sensation of it as the tall one pulled on it, cutting upward as it came out. Barney gasped, his eyes going wild with fear as he stared at the grinning

face. Then anger surged through him and he lashed out with his foot in a last murderous burst of energy, his big size twelve shoe striking the tall one in the groin, smashing cartilage and vessels in its wake. The tall one crumbled into a heap on the floor. Then Barney felt the hot bite of another blade driven into his back, and he whirled around, swinging wildly with his big arms, feeling the impact against his wrist as it crashed against the stocky one's jaw, sending him sprawling across the room.

For a moment, Barney stood weaving, his hands clutching his bleeding stomach, then slowly he sank to the floor, dead.

Gloria cried when the police questioned her. She just couldn't say enough good things about her dear departed husband. Barney was buried in Forest Lawn and Gloria placed flowers at his graveside every weekend for three whole weeks. Then she married Rock Taylor and they went to Europe for two weeks to forget.

Dion Landess was irresistible to women and Don let them have their fun, up to a certain point.

GIGOLO

BY
C. B. GILFORD

"I COULD KILL you," his wife said.

But Dion Landess went on looking in the mirror and tieing his green-and-yellow tie. "You're hardly the type for that, Merle darling," he said. His voice was calm, with the artificial calm of the practiced sophisticate. The unrest inside him was no different than usual, merely a perpetual dissatisfaction.

"The only thing you're capable of, darling," he went on, "is making a scene. Though I'll admit you're damned good at that."

He swung into the jacket of his charcoal-gray suit. Then he passed a comb through his dark hair several times. Not too often, not enough to destroy the slightly tousled look.

"Don't go, Dion," she said.

He turned to face her as she lay on the bed. She was in pajamas and a bed jacket, but she'd been in them so long she looked rumpled and perhaps even ill as she was pretending to be. Pretended illness to keep him home. But it hadn't worked.

"Merle," he said, "I told you we were both invited. So you can come along if you like. But I'm going anyway. If you think I'm going to sit here all evening and just stare at you, you're crazy."

Tears came to her eyes again. But she could cry so easily, as easily as turning on a faucet. She'd been pretty, but these crying jags weren't doing her any good. Ye gods, how could she expect him to care for her company in the shape she was in?

"You know why I don't want to go," she said.

"You've told me, yes. But it doesn't make sense, I'm afraid. It doesn't explain anything."

"Dion, I just can't go to a party and watch those women fawning over you, pawing you, throwing themselves at you. I can't watch it. I just can't."

He smiled a little. It was always so flattering to hear that particular complaint of hers. But his ego was old and tired. He smiled only a little. "Aren't you exaggerating a bit?" he answered.

"I wish I were. And that crowd up at Kati Roth's, they're the worst. They're vultures."

He put a foot up on her bed and adjusted a loose shoe lace. "I would think you'd enjoy the exhibition," he pointed out. "Seeing the vultures flapping around. When the vultures are so helpless, I mean. They can't steal anything. You have official title to the property." He finished with the laces, flicked an imaginary speck of dust off the toe of the shoe.

"I wish I did have you, Dion."

"Don't you? All paid for too."

"Paid for, yes, but apparently I don't have you to the extent that I can tell you what to do."

"You're working on it, darling. You're working on it."

"And you're fighting me."

He looked at her without concealing his contempt. But why was he bothering to argue with her? "I've got to keep fighting, to stay alive," he said. "I've got to keep one little spark of independence burning. I've got to keep one little corner of me that belongs to me. Darling, I won't pretend to be anything different than what I am. But the day I let any woman swallow me whole, digest me entirely, that's the day I hope I'll be dead."

"You'll be dead some day."

"I expect to be," he said.

"And then you'll be sorry."

"Maybe."

"Some day I'll kill you myself."

Her eyes were red-rimmed, puffy, and she was trembling visibly. Quite emotional. But it was an act, and he had seen it before. "Don't be ridiculous," he said.

"I took your revolver out of the drawer this afternoon."

Revolver? He had to think a moment. Oh yes, the little .22 that he had taken away from that chorus girl years ago. A toy gun, almost harmless. Well, Merle *was* getting melodramatic.

"There are some bullets in the drawer too," she said. "I tried them in the gun, and they fit. I held the gun in my hand for a few minutes. And I couldn't help thinking how easy it would be."

"What would be easy?"

"Killing you. That's the only thing that would stop you."

He laughed in her face. "Darling," he said, "there are undoubtedly some women who are constitutionally capable of committing murder. I've met some of them. You're not one, I'm afraid. You're selfish, possessive, even passionate sometimes. But inside you're soft, like a jelly. This is another one of your tricks, and I'm not in the least impressed by it."

He bent over and kissed her. He did it well, without a qualm or a tremor, even though he had no taste for doing it. There were still times when he enjoyed kissing Merle. Not now when she was blubbery like this. But he was vastly experienced at simulating either passion or affection as the occasion demanded.

"Look," he told her, "I'm going upstairs to Kati's. If you'd care to stop acting like a fool and get yourself looking presentable, you can join me there. If you don't I'll probably be home about midnight or so. Depends on how interesting or boring it turns out to be."

He kissed her again, lightly, and left. In the living room he stopped for a quick, small drink. He was a bit late for the party, so he needed a fast start. He went out the door and down the hall, silently on the thick carpet. He was going to use the elevator, but then he changed his mind. Kati Roth's apartment was only two floors up. He climbed the stairs instead.

His ears didn't detect Kati's party till he was just outside the door. A quiet affair. He felt disappointed. He was in the mood for something noisy tonight. But he went in anyway.

They were all there. All his current friends. Or at least the nearest thing he had to friends. "Dion!" they shouted when they saw him, and they engulfed him instantly. He was popular here.

Kati Roth finally caught his arm and drew him a little aside. Kati looked exquisite. She was in her thirties, he happened to know, but

her state of preservation was magnificent. Her blonde, lacquered hair was piled high on her head to give her the stately look she liked. Her green eyes were cool, yet not so cool. And her black dress was cut low enough to interest even him.

"Where's Merle?" Kati wanted to know.

"She's not feeling well. But she may be up later."

"You know she won't."

"Probably not."

"How come she let you out, darling?" The question was a deliberate needling.

"Don't be nasty, Kati," he said, and tried to leave.

But she hung onto his arm. "Darling, we all know Merle."

"Well, you don't know me."

"Darling, why do you put up with her?"

A good question. He'd asked it of himself plenty of times. "What else can I do?" he asked her.

"Darling, I'll take you over any time you say the word."

He had to smile. "That's an apt phrase, I must say. Take me over. But I doubt if I'd profit by the switch. We tried it once, remember? Didn't work. You were just like Merle is now. So I'd merely be changing owners again."

"Variety is the spice of life, darling." She took him by the lapels and kissed him languidly, without insistence.

"Katie, my girl," he said after she'd finished, "what could I possibly gain by taking you on as a new owner that I don't already have?"

She slapped him on the cheek lightly, almost caressingly, for that remark. "Dion," she said, "you're a beast."

"I'd divorce Merle and marry you," he told her, "if you'd promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"That you'd take enough sleeping pills on our wedding night to make me a widower by the next morning. Provided, of course, that you'd willed me what's left of your first husband's money. Then I'd be financially independent for the rest of my life. I'd put flowers on your grave every day and remain spotlessly true to you for all eternity. Because I could afford to then."

Her green eyes narrowed. "You're a devil," she said.

"I'm only what your sex has made of me, darling."

"I don't think I even like you."

"I know you don't. Why don't you send me home then?"

"I should. But I'd be miserable all the rest of the evening if I did."

"Mustn't have that. I'll make the sacrifice and stay."

"But I'm going to pout. You can find the bar by yourself."

"I'll manage. I have an unerring instinct."

She drifted away. He watched her bare shoulders idly. But he was more interested in the bar. His hand felt empty without a glass in it.

He knew almost everybody. Cory Michaels and Alex Magary gave him their hearty back thumpings. Sally Beckwith wanted to go to the bar with him, but he evaded her skilfully. Leslynne Karnes begged him for a tete-a-tete in Kati's den. He promised he would meet her there, although he had no intention of doing it. At the bar, sipping alone, was Paige Grayson.

He didn't mind Paige as much though. Paige was a smart girl, had something in her pretty head. And right now she looked stunningly different from the rest of them. She had a fresh new tan that went beautifully with her dark hair and eyes and her virgin white dress.

"You look like you've come straight from the sun lamp," he told her.

"No," she said. "Florida."

"Why on earth did you hurry back here?"

"Lonesome."

"For what?"

"You, Dion."

He wasn't easily surprised, but that surprised him. Paige Grayson was one of the few women in this crowd he hadn't played around with. She was kidding, of course. She'd always acted just a little superior to the rest of them, as if she failed to understand what so many of them saw in him.

"Look," he said, "I could follow through on that."

She watched him over the rim of her glass. "How?"

"You look delicious with that tan. I'd like to make your trip back from Florida worthwhile."

Her eyes had a sort of somber humor in them. Anyone except Paige Grayson might have taken him seriously. She laughed with him silently. Or was she laughing at him?

"Name the place and time," she said.

Was she kidding? The mystery of it tingled pleasantly inside of him. "Look," he said, "I have a weakness for suntans. So don't say things like that. It makes me nervous."

"That's encouraging," she answered. "So finally somebody's found your weakness."

Yes, she was kidding. And being vaguely insulting, in that superior fashion of hers. It made him feel a little angry, and to cover the anger, he ordered another drink. She didn't go away, but watched him. Why was he angry, he asked himself. Paige Grayson was simply different. She wasn't asking for possession of the property. He should appreciate that fine point.

"Time and place," he repeated finally. "You live across the street in the Towers, don't you? Right now."

She set her empty glass down on the bar top, and continued to watch him.

"Well?" he asked.

She shrugged.

But the barman interrupted.

"Phone call for you, Mr. Landess."

He handed his half-empty glass to Paige in an unmistakable gesture. But he had an uneasy feeling about the call. He asked the barman where there was a more privately located extension. The man suggested the kitchen and he went there. The kitchen was empty. He lifted the receiver and spoke.

"Dion!" There was a click then as the barman hung up in the other room.

"What do you want?" he asked her coldly.

"What are you doing, Dion?"

"You know damn well what I'm doing. I'm at Kati's party."

"Who else is there?"

"Lots of people."

"Please come home, Dion."

"I'll come home, Merle, when I get ready."

"No, right now."

"Look, don't give me orders..."

"If you don't come home, I'm coming after you."

The threat infuriated him. "Merle," he started to say, "I'm warning you..."

"I've got the gun, Dion." Her voice had calmed suddenly. "I'm holding it in my hand right now. I'll bring the gun with me. I know what's going on up there. And I won't stand for it. Do you understand that, Dion? You're my husband. You belong to me. You have no right to be up there with those women. I'm coming up there and take you home."

In a panic, he realized that she'd do it. Or try to. Make a big scene trying to. Wouldn't that be juicy? The jealous wife pointing a gun at him right there in front of everybody. A scene? It would be a production.

"Merle," he said quickly. "Stay there. I'm coming right down. I promise you. I'll be there in two minutes. Do you understand? Don't come up here. Please. I'm coming home."

There was a click at the other end of the wire. He didn't know for sure whether she'd heard him or not. So he had to get down there before she could leave the apartment. Paige Grayson, still holding his half-finished drink, was completely erased from his mind.

If he were lucky he could be unobtrusive about this. Too many of these people knew Merle too well. He would prefer they wouldn't be aware he was dashing home in response to his wife's threat. The rear door was here, in the kitchen, convenient. He slipped out, sure that he hadn't been seen.

He scorned the elevator and went down the stairs several at a time. Running along the carpeted corridor, he dragged out his keys. Well within the two minutes he had promised he was inside his own apartment with the door shut behind him.

It was the clicking of the door that brought her out. He didn't know what he was expecting. She

had been alternately calm and hysterical on the phone. But she came out of the bedroom still in her pajamas and bed jacket. She wasn't crying. Her face was set in hard lines. And she was holding the gun.

He wasn't afraid though. "Well, I'm here," he said. "What do you want?"

"I want you here," she told him.

"What does that mean?"

"You're here, and I want you to stay here. With your wife, where you belong."

"And what if I don't stay here?"

"Then I'll kill you."

He tried to keep his anger under control. "Merle, you can't treat a grown man like a child. You know that won't work. Now try to be sensible. We could get along pretty well if you weren't so damned possessive. We've gotten along well enough in the past, haven't we?"

"We're going to improve," she said, "starting tonight." And the gun didn't waver.

"You know I'm not going to submit to anything like this. Why do you try?" The fury inside him was growing.

"You have a choice, Dion. Either you act like my husband, or I'll kill you. And I don't mean just tonight. I mean from here on out."

If she'd been crying or pleading with him, he would have known what to do. But this was a new Merle he faced, calm, dry-eyed, sounding as if she meant every word. It puzzled and angered him at the same time. He hesitated.

She took advantage of his hesitation to walk around him. She kept the gun pointing at him every second, but she edged around him, till she was standing between him and the door. He maneuvered slowly to keep facing her.

"You've tried everything else, haven't you?" he said.

"Yes, I've tried everything else."

"You've threatened to leave me, divorce me, everything you could think of. It was all bluff. You're bluffing right now."

"Try me, Dion."

"I'm walking out. I'm going back up to Kati's."

"I'm warning you, Dion . . . "

He took a step toward her, saw her hand tense. But he still wasn't afraid. She had to be taught a lesson. She couldn't order him around, with a gun or any other way. He kept on moving toward her.

Then at the last moment, he knew he was wrong. But it still wasn't fear that motivated him. Anger was the strongest emotion he felt. Sensing now that she would try to shoot him, he dodged aside from and under the line of fire. He lunged toward her at the same time, drove his shoulder in against the lower part of her body.

The swiftness of his movement prevented her from pulling the trigger. He knocked her off balance, and against the door. His hand

reached for the gun, found her wrist first. They wrestled away from the door. She wasn't strong, but her desperation lent her strength. For the first few seconds she was almost a match for him. Tumbling against chairs, crashing tables and lamps, she still kept her feet. But then his other hand reached the gun. She went down on the rug backwards, with him on top of her. They fought for possession of the gun. He pried her fingers from around it. And then when he had it, he staggered to his feet.

She opened her mouth to scream. He knew from experience how piercing her screams could be. He hated any and all screaming women. He fired.

Just once. She didn't scream. Her body writhed and twitched there on the rug. Then her arms went limp, her hands unclenched, and she lay still. There was a small black hole in her bed jacket, with a growing circle of red forming around it.

And one thought, a huge thought, filled his mind. I've committed murder, but somehow I've got to escape, because I'm not going to die or go to prison for the sake of that woman lying there dead. There are too many women in the world, one woman isn't worth it . . .

Seconds went by. The shock of that tremendous surge of hatred he'd felt, of pulling the trigger, of seeing Merle with that bullet hole in her, took time to master and defeat. But his instinct for self-preservation was strong too. Gradually his mind turned practical.

There was no convenient possibility of disposing of the body. He ruled that out quickly. No, the body would have to stay here, and be discovered here. But if he didn't kill her, who could have? A burglar? Who thought the apartment was deserted, entered it, surprised the occupant, then panicked? Maybe, if the door had been left unlocked.

The gun. He held an advantage here. He'd kept the gun illegally. It wasn't registered as belonging to either him or his wife. She'd been killed then by a strange gun. If he could dispose of it, that is.

But the main thing was his alibi. If nobody had missed him from Kati's, or at least if no one had seen him leave, he was all right. He made a quick decision. To get back up to Kati's as fast as he could.

He switched off all the lights in the living room. That would make the killing seem all the more accidental. He put the gun in his pocket and went out the door. On the way out he carefully unlocked the door. Anybody therefore could walk right in. Then he ran, ran all the way, down the corridor, up the stairs, through the rear entrance of Kati's apartment, and into Kati's kitchen.

He was in luck. The kitchen was empty. His actual re-entrance was unseen. But the moment after his arrival, a whole group of people

stormed in. "Hi, Dion," Felix Jesson said.

So simple. Just "Hi, Dion." Not "Where have you been, Dion?"

Then he remembered Paige Grayson. And the barman. The barman had passed along the phone call. Had Merle identified herself to him? Of course not. Or the man would have said, "Your wife is on the phone." But he hadn't. He'd said, "Phone call for you, Mr. Landess." It wasn't a sure thing quite, but he'd have to count on it.

Paige Grayson was another problem. He'd been in the middle of making a date with her, had left his drink with her to keep her there while he answered the phone, then had abandoned her. Those things would need an explanation. A good one, if Paige had been really disappointed by his sudden exit. Then he got the inspiration. He hurried out to the rest of the party to find Paige.

He was a little surprised when he found her still there at the bar, still holding his glass. But he was confident too. He walked over to her, retrieved the glass, and finished its contents. When he looked down at her finally, he felt no qualms.

"I thought I'd been stood up," she said.

"You under-estimate yourself," he told her.

"That must have been quite a phone call."

"It was," he agreed.

"I'll bet it was your wife."

He felt the tiny shock of fear. But it passed quickly. "Merle? No, guess again."

"One of your many women, I suppose. I can't guess."

"You know, I can't either."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it was a woman all right. She made some very indecent propositions. I told her I had better plans. But the strangest thing was that she wouldn't tell me her name. One of my unknown admirers, I suppose."

It was a touch of genius, no less. If he didn't know who it was who called him, then there'd be nobody for the police to double-check with. The indecent suggestions part was good too. He'd curl some detective's ear with that, till the poor man would be completely distracted from the point at issue.

Paige Grayson had her eyes fastened on him. "What were the better plans you told her you had?" she wanted to know.

Luck! His luck was terrific! This was what he needed. Go across the street to the Towers with Paige Grayson. Then later, if anybody would remember that he seemed to have been absent from the party for awhile, he could freely admit that he had been. He'd been at the Towers. With a witness to prove it. And besides—he had to get this gun out of his pocket—Paige's apartment was the place for at least temporary disposal.

He looked down at Paige Grayson and he used his very best manner. "I was thinking about you," he said. "Or have you changed your mind?"

She shook her head.

"We can slip out," he said, "and probably no one will notice."

They tried it. He took her arm, and they threaded through the maze. No one stopped or delayed them. The party was gayer by this time, noisier, more confused. It made their escape ridiculously easy.

They rode the elevator silently. The doorman let them out of the building, and across the street another doorman let them into the Towers. They rode upstairs in the same silence.

"You're being pretty grim about this," she told him while she was unlocking her door.

"This kind of thing calls for concentration, not chit-chat," he said, and they went inside.

He had an opportunity to glance around while she was fixing a pair of drinks. It was a nice apartment. But what he was most interested in, of course, was a hiding place for the gun.

They sipped their drinks together on the sofa, and he realized he would have to make this business look more like what it was really supposed to be. This was a smart girl. He couldn't seem to be too pre-occupied.

"Why haven't we done this before?" he asked her.

"You've been pretty busy."

"Is that the only reason?"

The suntan shrugged prettily. "What else?"

"I don't think you've ever been in the mood before."

She smiled. "Oh yes, I have. But I can control my moods."

"That makes you different," he said admiringly. "But why did you bother with control?"

Her smile was more mysterious all the time. "Let's put it this way," she said. "I had to wait for our moods to coincide."

Really a bit puzzled, he said, "Do you mean this has been waiting for me all the time, and all I had to do was to say the word?"

But she didn't answer. They emptied their glasses in silence, watching each other like wary duelers.

Then finally she stood. "Would you excuse me, Dion?" she said, and she went into the next room.

This was the chance he'd been waiting for. He'd selected the place already. The moment she disappeared, he went over to the bookcase. It was quite a large affair, and the thought ran through his mind —either this girl is really on the intellectual side, or her act is not the usual one.

Now supposing she were the intellectual type, which of these books would she be least likely to use in the next few days? Guesswork. Who could predict a woman? He decided against the novel section,

which contained Proust and Wolfe and things like that, because those seemed to be things she might casually take out to read. And he skipped over the art tomes. She might want to look at pictures sometime. He chose finally—just on a hunch—the Shakespeare set, five gorgeously bound red-leather volumes. Show pieces, with little or no sign of wear. *If it were done when 't is done, then 't were well it were done quickly.* The line flashed into his mind, and the appropriateness of it pleased him somehow.

He took the gun from his pocket, slipped it behind the Shakespeare, and returned quickly to the sofa.

He was ready now for all eventualities . . .

Considering the circumstances, considering that he was trying to escape being punished for a murder —and one can expect a reasonable amount of inconvenience in that situation — the rest of it went off amazingly well.

He had killed his wife at a little past eleven o'clock. He left Kati Roth's apartment with Paige Grayson about eleven-fifteen. He returned to Kati's, still in the company of Paige Grayson, about twelve-thirty.

Their re-entrance at Kati's didn't go unnoticed. The reaction was varied but predictable. Ill-concealed anger in people like Kati. Solicitous clucking from Felix Jesson. Bawdy remarks from Alex Margary. Frank jealously from Leslynne Karnes who apparently was still waiting for that promised tete-a-tete.

"Let's all take Dion home and see what Merle thinks about this," somebody suggested.

They had just reached that state where they thought something like that was a good idea. Curiously enough, Dion agreed with them. Secretly, of course. He made an outward show of reluctance.

So they all trooped downstairs. Cory Michaels was in the lead, and he made the proper remark about the strangeness of the unlocked door. It was he who went inside first, who stumbled around finding a light, and who therefore and thereby also found the corpse. Sally Beckwith, right on cue, supplied the scream.

They got out of there pretty quickly and went back upstairs. Felix sagely told them that they should go back, since nothing in the Landess apartment should be touched. Kati, her anger completely evaporated, insisted that not even Dion should remain at the grisly scene. He needed a drink and moral support.

Back up at Kati's, much soberer than before, they all had several drinks. Felix telephoned the police. A Detective Shannon and a large and assorted crew of cops arrived quickly and just as quickly went to work. Everybody stayed around till dawn, and everybody got questioned.

The pattern of affairs emerged

easily and clearly enough for Detective Shannon. Merle Landess had been shot around eleven o'clock. The condition of the body and the chance testimony of a neighbor across the hall from the Landess apartment who "had thought" he'd heard a shot, both indicated the time of death. The unlocked door perhaps pointed to an unknown intruder. The most likely suspect, Dion Landess, seemed to have an air-tight alibi. Yes, he'd been absent for a while... maybe it was around eleven... but he hadn't gone home to his wife... he'd been over at the Towers with Paige Grayson. And where was the murder gun? Dion Landess had never owned a gun.

Detective Shannon summed up this case to Dion two days later. He had come to his conclusions rather reluctantly. "At first I was real sure everything pointed to you, Mr. Landess. You weren't getting along with your wife. You were playing around with other women and she resented it. Trouble is though, you've, got a damned good alibi, and there's no positive evidence—no gun, for instance—to link you with the murder directly. So I guess we'll have to leave it at that. Looks like it was done by somebody who walked into your apartment because the door was left open."

"Look," Dion told the man, "I won't pretend that my wife and I were on the best of terms. Though if she'd been a little more broad-minded, we'd have done all right. I didn't hate her. I liked other women, but I also liked my wife. So I hope you find the person who killed her."

"So do I," Detective Shannon agreed. "So do I."

Paige looked magnificent in the negligee. It was a stunning effect, the filmy white against her tanned skin. But he was bored with the sight of her.

"I thought we were going out," he told her, as he shut the door and came farther into the apartment.

"Out?"

"Yes, I told you Sally Beckwith was giving a party. Now go and change. I'll wait for you."

But instead of going obediently to the bedroom, she came into his arms instead. "Darling, do you think it's proper that such a new widower go partying so soon? Not even a week yet, darling. It's indecent."

"Let's don't pretend, shall we not?"

"But, darling, I don't want you to act like a barbarian. Even if you don't, I have some pride, you know."

He pried her arms off his shoulders, and backed away a step. "What do you mean you have some pride?" he wanted to know. "What have you got to do with it?"

She went right on smiling. "You and I are sort of associated now, aren't we?"

"Associated? Not that I know of."

"Well, linked together then. In the public eye, that is."

"I hadn't been aware of it."

"Well, darling, I have inherited you, haven't I?"

With a great effort he controlled himself. "No, you haven't inherited me," he told her gently. He wouldn't have been so gentle if that little revolver weren't still behind those books. He had come to reclaim it, and once he had it, he'd talk as he pleased. He just had to get her out of the room half a minute, that was all.

But she walked instead over to the sofa and curled up on it, sitting on her legs in one corner of it, quite like a beautiful cat. And looking just as pleased.

"Perhaps I didn't phrase it rightly," she was saying. "No, I didn't quite inherit you. Because Merle didn't leave you to me in her will. You're mine now all the same though. But let's don't argue about it."

"Well, we will argue," he said, going toward her. "What makes you think there's anything at all between us? Just because I happened to be here making love to you while my wife was being murdered across the street? What does that make me to you?"

"My property."

"What!" He was hearing Merle, the dead voice, saying the words.

"All right, my lover then. What does it matter what we call you? *What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*"

He stared at her. Now he knew why she looked so pleased.

"Shakespeare, darling. I read Shakespeare all the time. Didn't I ever tell you I wanted to be an actress?"

But just to make finally sure, he walked across the room to the shelves of books. With one sweep of his hand he dislodged the five pretty red volumes and hurled them to the floor. The space behind them was empty.

"Where is it?" he asked, turning.

"Where it's safe," she told him.

"What's the price?"

"You, darling. Is that so bad? Am I so hard to take?"

He looked at her. No, she wasn't.

"Come here then, Dion, and sit by me," she said.

His decision formed slowly.

"I'd rather not go to Sally Beckwith's party. I want to stay home and have you make love to me. Come here, Dion."

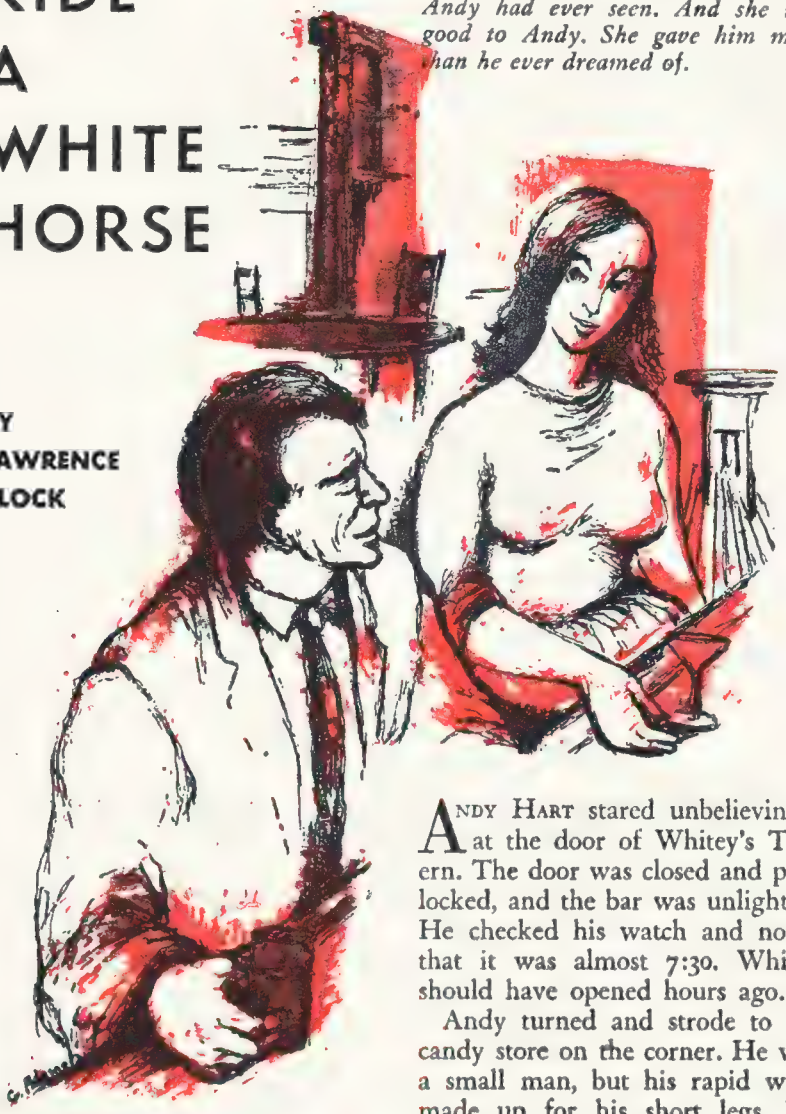
He went. He walked toward, but then past her. To where the telephone stood in a corner by the door. He dialed a number.

He looked at Paige Grayson while he spoke. It gave him a great deal of satisfaction, perhaps the greatest thrill he had ever felt in his life with women. "I want to get in touch with Detective Shannon," he said. "Tell him I have some information on the Merle Landess murder."

RIDE A WHITE HORSE

The girl had the most beautiful body Andy had ever seen. And she was good to Andy. She gave him more than he ever dreamed of.

BY LAWRENCE BLOCK



ANDY HART stared unbelievingly at the door of Whitey's Tavern. The door was closed and padlocked, and the bar was unlighted. He checked his watch and noted that it was almost 7:30. Whitey should have opened hours ago.

Andy turned and strode to the candy store on the corner. He was a small man, but his rapid walk made up for his short legs. He walked as he did everything else—precisely, with no waste motion.

"Hey," he asked the man behind the counter, "how come Whitey didn't open up yet?"

"He's closed down for the next two weeks. Got caught serving minors." Andy thanked him and left.

The news was disturbing. It didn't annoy him tremendously, but it did break up a long-established routine. Ever since he had started working as a book-keeper at Murrow's Department Store, eleven years ago, he had been in the habit of eating a solitary meal at the Five Star Diner and drinking a few beers at Whitey's. He had just finished dinner, and now he found himself with no place to go.

Standing on the streetcorner, staring at the front of the empty bar, he had a vague sensation that he was missing something. Here he was, 37 years old, and there was nowhere in the city for him to go. He had no family, and his only friends were his drinking companions at Whitey's. He could go back to his room, but there he would have only the four walls for company. He momentarily envied the married men who worked in his department. It might be nice to have a wife and kids to come home to.

The thought passed as quickly as it had come. After all, there was no reason to be broken-hearted over a closed bar. There was undoubtedly another bar in the neighborhood where the beer was as good and the people as friendly. He glanced around, and noticed a bar directly across the street.

There was a large neon sign over the doorway, with the outline of a horse and the words "White Horse Cafe." The door was a bright red, and music from a juke box wafted through it.

Andy hesitated. There was a bar, all right. He had passed it many times in the past, but had never thought to enter it. It seemed a little flashy to him a little bit too high-tone. But tonight, he decided, he'd see how it was on the inside. A change of pace wouldn't hurt him at all.

He crossed the street and entered. A half-dozen men were seated at the bar, and several couples occupied booths on the side. The juke box was playing a song which he had heard before, but he couldn't remember the title. He walked to the rear, hung his coat on a peg, and took the end seat.

He ordered a beer and sat nursing it. He studied his reflection in the mirror. His looks were average —neatly-combed brown hair, brown eyes, and a prominent chin. His smile was pleasant, but he didn't smile too often. He was, all in all, a pretty average guy.

The time passed slowly. Andy finished his beer and ordered another, and then another. Some of the people left the bar and others entered, but he saw no one he recognized. He was beginning to re-

gret coming to the White Horse. The beer was fine and the music was nice enough, but he had no more company than the four walls of his room provided.

Then, while he was drinking his fourth beer, the door opened and she entered. He saw her at once. He had glanced to the door every-time it opened in the hope of seeing an acquaintance, and each time he had turned back to his glass. This time, however, he couldn't turn his eyes away from her.

She was tall, very pretty, with long blonde hair that fell to her shoulders. She took off her coat and hung it up and Andy could see that she was more than just pretty. Her skirt clung to her hips and hugged her thighs, and her breasts threatened to break through the tight film of her sweater. Andy couldn't stop looking at her. He knew that he was staring, but he couldn't help himself. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He was surprised when she walked over and sat down on the stool beside him. Actually, it was natural enough. There were only two other empty stools at the bar. But to Andy it seemed like the rarest of coincidences.

He was glad that she was sitting next to him but at the same time he was embarrassed. He felt a desire for her which was stronger than anything he had experienced in years. He had neither needed nor wanted a woman in a long while, but now he felt an instantaneous physical craving for her.

The girl ordered a sidecar and sipped at it, and Andy forced himself to drink his beer. He wanted desperately to start a conversation with her but couldn't think of a way to begin. He waited, listening to the music, until she finished her drink.

"Miss," he said nervously, "could I buy you another?"

She turned and looked at him for a long moment, and he felt himself flush. "Yes," she said at last. "Thank you."

He ordered a sidecar for her and another beer for himself, and they began talking. He was amazed to discover that he was able to talk freely and easily to her, and that she in turn seemed interested in everything that he had to say. He had wanted to talk to anybody in the world, and talking to her was almost the answer to a prayer.

He told her everything about himself—his name, his job, and the sort of life he led. She didn't have much to say about herself. Her name was Sara Malone and she was 24, but that was all she volunteered.

From that point on the time flew by, and Andy was thankful that Whitey's had been closed. He wanted the evening to pass more slowly. He was happy, and he dreaded returning to his empty bed in his tiny room.

Finally she glanced at her watch,

then smiled up at him. "I have to go," she said. "It's getting late."

"One more drink," he suggested.

"No," she said. "We've had enough. Let's go."

He helped her on with her coat and walked outside with her. He stood there on the sidewalk, awkwardly. "Sara," he said, "when can I see you again?"

She smiled, and it was a warm, easy smile. "You could come home with me. If you'd like to."

They walked quickly, with the blackness of the night around them like a blanket. And when they reached her apartment they kissed and they held each other. He took her, and lying there in her arms, with her firm breasts warm against his chest, he felt complete and whole again.

When he woke up the next morning she was already awake, and he smelled food cooking. He washed and dressed, then went into the kitchen for breakfast. It was a fine breakfast, and so very much better than toast and coffee at the Five Star Diner. He had to keep looking across the table at her to make sure that he was really awake and that she was really there. He couldn't believe what had happened, but the memory of last night was too vivid to leave room for doubt.

They didn't talk much during breakfast. He couldn't talk, afraid that he might do something to spoil it all. When he finished his second cup of coffee, he stood up regretfully.

"I have to go now," he said. "I have to be at work by 9."

"When will you be home? I'll have dinner ready."

"Right after work," he said. "About 5:15 or so. Don't you have to work?" He remembered that she hadn't mentioned it last night.

"No. I have enough money for a while, so I don't work." She smiled. "Would you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"I checked a package at the Public Library yesterday and forgot to pick it up on the way out. You work across the street from the library, don't you?"

He nodded.

"Here," she said. She took a ticket from her purse and handed it to him. "Will you get it for me?"

"Sure." He put the ticket in his pocket and slipped on his overcoat. He walked slowly to the door, and when he turned she was in his arms suddenly, kissing him. "I love you," he said. He walked lightly down the street, and she closed the door softly behind him.

His work went easily and quickly that day. He was anxious for five o'clock to roll around, but the memory of last night and the promise of the coming one made the time pass. At noon he picked up her parcel at the library, a small box wrapped in brown wrapping paper.

He brought it home to her that night, and she put it on the top shelf in the closet.

Sara cooked him a good dinner, and he helped her with the dishes. They sat in the living-room, listening to records, until it was time for bed. Then they made love, and he knew that he could never live without her again, that he could never sleep without her beside him.

Days passed and the nights. Andy had never been so happy and contented in his life. He settled into a routine once again, but it was a groove rather than a rut. His life before had lacked only a woman like Sara to make it complete, and now nothing was missing.

From time to time he thought of asking her to marry him. But, for some reason, he was afraid to. Everything was so perfect that he was hesitant to chance changing the arrangement. He let things remain as they were.

He knew very little about her, really. She seemed reluctant to talk about her past life. She didn't say how she was able to afford the luxurious apartment they lived in, or what she did during the days while he was at the office. He didn't press her. Nothing mattered, just so long as she was there for him when he arrived home.

She had him pick up packages frequently—about twice a week or so. They were always the same type—small boxes wrapped in brown wrapping paper. Sometimes they were in a locker at the bus depot, sometimes at the library, sometimes in a safety deposit box at the bank. He wondered idly what the boxes contained, but she wouldn't tell him, and he suspected it was some sort of medicine which she didn't want to mention. The question nagged at him, though. It bothered persistently. He didn't care about her earlier life, for that was beyond her now. But he wanted to know everything about her as she was now, wanted to share all of her life.

Inevitably, one evening he brought home a package and she was not home. He sat waiting for her, the package in his lap. He stared at the package, turning it over and over in his hands, as though he were trying to burn a hole in the wrapping paper with his eyes. Five, ten minutes passed, and he couldn't stand it any longer. He untied the string, removed the wrapping paper, and opened the box.

The box was filled with a white powder. He looked at it, smelled it, and tasted a flake of it. It was nothing that he could recognize. He was wondering what the devil it could be when he heard a key in the lock, and he began guiltily to re-wrap the package. Sara entered the room while he was still fussing with the string.

"Andy!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

"The package came undone," he

said lamely. "I was re-wrapping it for you."

She looked at him accusingly. "Did you see what was inside?"

"Yes," he said. "What was it, Sara?"

She took the box from him. "Never mind," she said. "Just some powder."

But this time he would not be put off. He had to know. "What is it? I'll find out anyway."

She let out a sigh. "I guess you had to find out. I . . ."

He waited.

"It's . . . horse, Andy."

"What!"

"Horse. Heroin."

"I know what 'horse' is," he said. "But what are you doing with it? You're not an addict, are you?" He couldn't believe what she had told him, but he knew from the expression on her face that she was telling the truth. Still, it was hard to believe, and he did not want to believe it.

"No," she said. "I'm not an addict. I'm what they call a pusher, Andy. I sell the heroin to addicts."

For a moment he could not speak. Finally he managed to say, "Why?"

She hesitated. "Money," she said. "I make lots of money. And it costs money for an apartment like this, and for good clothes and steak for dinner."

"You'll stop. I'm making enough money for us both, and you'll stop before you get caught. We'll get a smaller place somewhere and . . ."

"No," she cut in. "I won't get caught, Andy. And I want to keep on like this. I like steak, Andy. I like this place."

He stared at her. His mouth dropped open and he shook his head from side to side. "No! Sara, I won't let you!"

"I'm going to."

"I . . . I can't pick up any more packages for you."

She smiled. "Yes, you can. And you will, because you need me." She threw back her shoulders so that her breasts strained against the front of her dress. "We need each other, don't we?"

He stood up, and the package fell to the floor. He reached for her and lifted her in his arms, carrying her to the bedroom. And they came together fitfully and fiercely, as though the force of their bodies could erase everything else.

Later, when he was lying still beside her, she said, "In a way, it's better that you know. I'll need help with the business, and you can quit your job and help me. I guess it's better this way."

At that moment Andy began to distrust her. His love slowly dissolved eventually to be replaced by an ever-increasing hatred.

The following morning he quit his job. It had never been an especially exciting job, but he had liked it. He liked the office and the people he worked with. He hadn't wanted to quit.

But he could never give up Sara. He couldn't live without her, couldn't sleep again in an empty bed. She had become a habit, a part of his routine, and he had to have her no matter what.

The days that followed were hell for him. Sara taught him the business step-by-step, from pick-ups and deliveries to actual sales. He learned how to contact an addict and take his money from him. He watched feverish men cook the heroin on a spoon and shoot it into a vein. And he watched Sara refuse a shot to an addict without money, and watched the man beg and plead while his hands twitched and his knees shook.

He thought he would lose his mind. He argued with Sara, telling her what a rotten thing she was doing, but he couldn't sway her. He saw her for what she was—cold, mercenary, and ruthless. And in her arms at night, he couldn't believe that she was the same woman.

Bit by bit, piece by piece, he learned the business. It became a routine after awhile, but it was a routine which he hated. He settled into it, but he had trouble sleeping nights. Time after time he tried to leave her, but it was impossible.

One night he was sitting in the livingroom, trying to read a magazine. She came over and sat beside him taking the magazine from his hands. She handed him a brown cigarette, loosely-packed. "Here," she said, smiling. "Smoke this."

"What! This is marijuana, isn't it?"

"That's right. Smoke it."

"Are you crazy?"

She smiled slowly and ran her hand up and down his thigh. "Don't be silly. I've been smoking pot for a long time now, and it doesn't hurt you. It makes you feel real fine. Try it?"

He drew away from her, his eyes searching hers. "I don't want to become an addict, Sara. I've seen the poor fish suffer, and I don't want it."

She laughed. "It's not habit forming. I've been smoking since I was 17, and I just have a joint whenever I want one. You want to stay clear of horse, but this won't hurt you."

He drew a deep breath. "No," he said, firmly. "I don't want it."

Her hand worked on his thigh, and with her other hand she toyed with the buttons on her blouse. "You want me, though," she said, huskily. "Don't you, Andy?"

She put the cigarette between his lips and lit it, and made him smoke it quickly, drawing the pungent, acrid smoke deep into his lungs. At first he was dizzy; then his stomach churned and he was sick. But she only made him smoke another, and this time the smoke took hold of him and held him, and the room grew large and small and large again, and he made love to her with a thousand voices shriek-

ing warnings inside his brain.

And so marijuana, too, became a part of Andy's routine. He smoked as an alcoholic drank, losing his worries in the smoke. It was more a habit with him than it was with Sara. He grew to depend upon it, mentally if not physically.

And he learned things, too. He learned to smoke the joint down to a "roach," or butt, in order to get the maximum charge from it. He learned to hold as much smoke as he could in his lungs for as long as possible, in order to intensify the effect. He learned to smoke two or three joints in a row.

At the same time, he learned his business from start to finish. He bargained with contacts and squeezed the last cent from customers, burying his conscience completely. He gained an understanding of the operations of the narcotics racket, from the Big Man to the small-time pusher. Everything he did became part of him, and part of his routine.

He sat alone in the apartment one day, just after selling a cap of heroine to an addict. He opened a glassine envelope and idly poked the powder with the point of a pencil.

Horse, he thought. White Horse, the same as the bar where they had met. Valuable stuff. People killed for it, went through hell for it.

He sat looking at it for a long time, and then he folded a slip of paper and poured some of the powder on it. He raised the paper to his nose, closed his eyes, and sniffed deeply. He drew the flakes through his nostrils and into his lungs, and the heroin hit home.

It was a new sensation, a much bigger charge than marijuana had given him. He liked it. He threw away the slip of paper, put the heroin away, and leaned back to relax. Everything was pink and fuzzy, soft and smooth and cool.

He started sniffing heroin daily, and soon he noticed that he was physically aware of it when it was time for a fix. He began increasing the dosage, as his body began to demand more of the drug. And he didn't tell Sara anything about it.

His hate for her had grown, but it too became habitual. He learned to live with it. However, when they had a disagreement over the business, he realized that she was standing in the way.

Andy wanted to expand operations. He saw that, with a little effort and a little muscle, he and Sara could move up a notch and have a crowd of pushers under them. He explained it to her, step by step. It couldn't miss.

"No," she said, flatly. "We're doing fine right where we are. We make good money and nobody will want us out of the way."

"We could make more money," he said. "Lots more. The cops wouldn't be able to touch us."

"It's a risk."

He shrugged. "Everything's a risk. Walking across the street is a risk, but you can't stay on your own block forever. It's a chance we've got to take."

She refused, and once again she used her body as a bargaining point. At last he gave in, as always, but the hate was beginning to boil in him.

A few days later an addict came whining for a shot. Andy saw the way he trembled and twitched, but the spectacle didn't bother him any longer. He had seen it time and time again, until it was just a part of the day's work.

"Sorry, junkie," he said. "Come back when you raise the dough."

The man begged, and Andy started to push him out the door when a thought came to him. He opened the door and let the man in.

"C'mere," he said. "You got a spike?"

The addict nodded dumbly and pulled a hypodermic needle from his pocket. Andy took it from him and inspected it, turning it over and over in his hand. "Okay," he said at length. "A shot for your spike."

The man sighed with relief, then demanded, "How am I gonna take the shot without a spike?"

"Take it first; then get out."

Andy followed the addict into the bathroom and watched him heat the powder on a spoon. Then he filled the syringe and shot it into the vein in his arm. It hit immediately, and he relaxed.

"Thanks," he said. He handed the syringe to Andy. "Thanks."

"Get out." The addict left, and Andy closed the door after him.

He washed the syringe in hot water, then put some heroin on a spoon. He deftly filled the syringe and gave himself a shot in the fleshy part of his arm.

It was far more satisfying than sniffing the powder. It was stronger and faster. He felt good.

As the heroin became more and more a part of his life, he switched to the mainline, shooting it directly into the vein. It was necessary to him now, and he itched to build up his trade until he controlled narcotics in the town. He knew he could handle it. Already, he had virtually replaced Sara. She was the messenger now, while he handled the important end. But she still called the shots, for she still held the trump card. And no matter how he argued, she would simply rub herself up against him and kiss him, and the argument would be finished. So he could do nothing but wait.

And, at last, he was one day ready.

He took a long, sharp knife from the kitchen drawer and walked slowly to the bedroom, where she lay reading. She looked up from the magazine and smiled at him, stretching languorously.

"Hi," she said. "What's up?"

He returned the smile, keeping

the knife behind his back. "I have news for you," he said. "We're expanding, like I suggested. No more small-time stuff, Sara."

She sighed. "Not again, Andy. I told you before . . ."

"This time *I'm* telling *you*."

"Oh," she said, amused. "Do you think you can get along without me?"

"I know I can."

"Really?" She threw back the bedcovers and smiled up at him. "You need me, Andy."

He forced himself to look at her. He ran his eyes over the firm breasts, the soft curves of her hips. He looked at her carefully, waiting for the familiar stir within him. It didn't come.

"I don't need you," he said, slowly. "Look."

He held out his right hand, the hand that held the knife. He unbuttoned the sleeve and rolled it down slowly, showing her the marks of the needle. "See? I'm a junkie, Sara. I only care about one thing, baby, and it isn't you. You don't show me a thing."

But her eyes were not on the marks on his arm. They were on the knife in his hand, and they were wide with fear.

"I don't need you at all," he went on. "I don't need liquor, I don't need sex, I don't need you. You're just dead wood, Sara."

She rose from the bed and moved toward him. "Andy," she cooed. "Andy, honey." Her whole body seemed to reach out for him, hungrily.

He shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "It just won't work any more. I don't care about it. Just the horse is all that matters."

She looked into his eyes, and they were flat and uncaring. "Wait," she said. "We'll play it your way, Andy. We'll expand, like you said. Anything you say."

"You don't understand. I don't *need* you."

"Please!" she moaned. "Please!"

"Sorry. It's time for my shot." And he lowered the knife.

He moved toward her and she tried to back away, but he kept coming, the knife pointed at her. "No!" she shrieked. And she started to say something else, but before she could get the words out the knife was in her heart.

The shot tore into his hip, ripping flesh, splintering bone, sending searing waves of pain through his entire body, paralyzing him. He lay crumpled on the ground, dying, while the other watched, and laughed.

DESERT CHASE

A Full-Length Novel

BY THURBER JENSEN

It was the first flat tire and the night of the second day, a starless night of August heat on the Mojave, south of Las Vegas and north of Searchlight.

Mike Bruce clapped the hubcap in place, fishing his tools up out of the dust. His wife, Helen, held the flashlight, her skirts whipping in the hot summer desert wind. Suddenly, their seven-year old son, leaped into the velvet black highway, his arms wildly flailing, and

shouting, "Look! A car, and it's slowing down!"

"Jake, get out of the road!" Mike shouted in exasperation. "How many times have I told you those cars come around the bend up there ninety miles an hour? Now get off the highway and stay off!"

Helen, forgetting Mike's need of the flashlight in her concern, rushed over and grabbed Jake. The oncoming car, with the brilliant headlights of the new models, was already slowing. It turned off the highway onto the shoulder, and drew to a stop, facing Mike's station wagon. The headlights glared out at Mike and the entire scene ruthlessly.

Mike Bruce stood up, brushing pebbles and sand from his knees. He was a tall man with heavy shoulders. He raised one arm to motion the newly arrived car on. "No trouble!" he called. "Thanks just the same."

The headlights suddenly dimmed and the ignition was turned off. Someone opened a door and stepped out.

Mike repeated, "Just a flat tire! All fixed now. Thanks anyway!"

The stranger approached. He was a medium-built man and his hat was pulled down over his brow. His right hand was in his coat pocket, though it was far too hot for a coat.

Helen said, "We won't need any help. We're about ready to move on."

Another door slammed and a second man came over. He was hatless and wore an open white shirt, but like his friend he held his right hand in the pocket of his jacket.

The first man said to the second. "Just him and her and a kid!"

The gun came out and Mike stared at it. Helen, small and dark and quick, stifled a scream.

"Be careful, Mike," she whispered. "They look like they mean business."

The first man said harshly, "Shut up, lady!"

Jake suddenly rose from his sitting position and ran to his father, hugging his leg and whimpering. "Daddy! Are they going to shoot us?"

Mike squeezed his arm gently. "Ssh, Jake," he warned. Then to the strangers, "What do you want?"

"We're taking your car," the man with the gun said, easily enough.

The other man opened the door to the driver's seat and turned on the ignition key. "Nearly full!" he said. "Look's okay."

"Good!" the gunman said cheerfully. "Now, Mac," he turned to Mike, "this is the deal. You take our car—we take yours!"

Mike walked toward the other car and the gun followed him like a compass needle. He looked inside. It was a recent model and looked all right except for the dark, jelling substance on the seat. It was splashed on the vinyl upholstery and along the floor, and smeared the door on the opposite side.

Helen said, "May we take out our overnight bag and my purse?"

The gunman said, "No! Leave it! You and the kid get in the station wagon back here!"

"Here? You mean in our car?" her voice was small and scared. Mike heard it and wanted to bash the fellow's brains in.

"Yes, in your car!" his tones were brittle and cracked like a dry stick.

Helen hurried over toward Mike who turned to face her quickly, barring her from the sight inside the car. Her eyes looked into his—frightened eyes in a small, pale face.

He said, "Do as the man says, Helen!"

"Oh, no!" she huddled in fear, her arms tightly about her, staring at him, beseechingly.

"Helen, please!" he urged. "Take Jake and get in the back of our car!"

But still she stood frozen in fear. The first man strode over to her and roughly grabbed her arm. "Get in back!" he ordered, and almost threw her ahead of him, stumbling against the rear door of the station wagon. Then, with one swoop, he gathered up Jake and tossed him in the front seat.

The one with the gun walked over to Mike who still stood at the door of the other car. In a calm, even voice, he said, "Get this, Mac! Just so long as nobody stops us or asks questions your wife and kid are safe! Just that long and no longer! You understand?"

Mike nodded. "Yes! And for how long?"

"Can't say!" He reached inside his pants pocket with his free hand and pulled out a billfold, handing it to Mike. This is for you," he said. "Now hand over yours!"

Mike hesitated a moment, and then slowly withdrew his pocket book.

The gunman didn't even glance at it, but pushed it into his own pocket.

"How will I know if my wife and boy are all right?" Mike asked.

The gunman shrugged. "Watch the papers! No reports on us being picked up by cops—you know your wife and kid are all right!"

The terms were set, and without wasting any more time the two men climbed into the front of Mike's car and sped out into the night.

Long after the tail lights from his blue Mercury station wagon had disappeared, and the roar of the motor gave way to silence, Mike still strained his eyes down the long velvet stretch of highway.

Finally, he came back to himself and looked down at the new billfold in his hand. He opened it and, with the help of his lighter, scanned the contents. There was an oil company credit card and a Nevada driver's license made out in the name of Charles Gannett. Gannett was described as sixty years old, dark skinned, six feet tall and weighing two hundred pounds.

Obviously Charles Gannett was neither of the two men who had accosted him just now. Mike looked inside the car at the big jellied mess on the seat and wondered if it had come from Charles Gannett and where he – or his remains – were now.

Then he saw the gun. It was a .22 pistol and it was half under the seat, the gleam of its metal dulled by drying blood.

Great! Mike thought. I'm left with enough evidence to put those two behind bars, and what can I do about it? Nothing! Except keep my half of the bargain and pray those bastards keep their's. But the cruel truth was Mike had no guarantee that Helen and Jake's safety depended on him. More likely they would serve as most hostages: as a means for the gunmen's escape. And then–Mike shuddered at the thought–then it would be easier, more convenient to dispose of them. Well, he would first have to play along for the time being. There was no alternative. He would have to act alone and on blind faith.

Only how long would he be able to mislead the police? Were they even now forming road blocks at Searchlight to the south and Davis Dam to the north? If the police stopped Mike not only could he not report his situation, but they would hold him for questioning, thus stopping him in his efforts to follow his wife and son.

He pulled out his handkerchief and opened the car door on the opposite side. He reached down and retrieved the gun, wiping off the blood. Examining the chambers he found only one shot had been fired. He put the gun in his trousers.

In the far distance, he saw the bobbing of approaching lights. He estimated the time it would take the oncoming car to reach him. Then he got in his new car and drove it further off the side of the road, leaving the headlights on. He opened the glove compartment and found a flashlight.

The oncoming lights were approaching fast. Mike stood in the middle of the road and waved the flashlight. It was a pickup truck and there were two in the front seat. The driver was a heavy man, wearing a widebrimmed hat and worn boots. Beside him sat a young girl–plump and round-faced with a tendency to cross-eyes. Her mouth was open and her eyes rolled grotesquely when Mike pulled the gun.

"Get out!" Mike ordered.

The man swore. "What's this country coming to? You damned tourists!"

Mike said, "Shut up! Give me your pocket book and whatever else you have in identification."

The man spit and glared at Mike. Mike knew he would have to be tough. He approached the fellow holding the gun in front. With his left hand he slapped him quickly across the face. The girl in the car screamed.

Indecision and fear crossed the face of the driver. He pulled out his pocket book and Mike pulled out his—the one he had recently acquired.

"We'll just trade!" said Mike.

"What's the idea?" demanded the man—his tone not so belligerent as before.

Mike said, "You'll take my car—I'll take yours! Simple! But the girl stays with me!"

"Oh no you don't!" The fellow gave a lunge toward Mike and Mike came up swiftly with his left hand into the pit of the man's stomach.

The fellow buckled and drew back. Mike waved the gun and walked toward the pickup.

"What are you going to do with her?" the fellow called. "That's my daughter and I'll kill you if anything happens to her! I'll hunt you down and kill you!"

Mike said, "She'll be safe just so long as nobody stops me or asks any questions." He turned on his heel and came closer to the fellow. "Do you understand? The first cop who stops me or asks questions—your girl gets it! I have nothing to lose as you'll see when you get in my car."

At last the fellow understood and Mike got in the pickup beside the scared teenage girl.

The girl shrieked, "Daddy! Stop him! Don't let him take me!"

Mike saw the agonized look on the fellow's face as he backed away toward the car and the new shock that awaited him when he looked inside and saw blood on the seat—when he began to realize that he, too, must somehow sidestep the police.

Mike turned the pickup around and headed south. He bore down hard on the road, the pickup rumbling and complaining at the unaccustomed speed.

After about five miles of it he glanced at the plump girl beside him. He was staring straight ahead but the eye on his side made it appear that she was watching him. "Look!" he said in short, clipped tones. "You won't be hurt if you behave yourself! But the first move you make you'll get slugged and then I'll have to gag you and tie you up and throw you on the floor of this truck. You can bounce along with those two water cans and those chains and ropes back there."

Her full lips trembled slightly and Mike drew a deep breath. I hope that holds her, he thought.

"If we come across anything—like a patrol or a road block or anything at all, you keep quiet," he ordered.

"The sheriff at Searchlight knows us!" she blurted.

Oh God! What a break! "Is that so?" Mike mumbled. "Well, in that case you'll be able to get us right through. You just tell the sheriff that I'm a friend of the family."

"I won't do it!" she announced.

He heaved a big breath and pulled the pickup off to the shoul-

der. He slowed and braked and turned off the ignition.

He held the gun in his right hand and grabbed her right wrist with his left, holding tight until he saw her wince with the power in his fingers. Then, cruelly, he raised her arm twisting just a little. He saw her face grow pale with fear and her eyes drift apart wildly.

"Where do you live?" he asked conversationally, suddenly dropping her arm. There was a sickness in the pit of his stomach but he controlled his words carefully.

"Needles!" she gasped. "Needles, California."

"Where in Needles?" he pursued.

"Up the river—this side. We have a ranch there."

She was breathing hard and her hands were clutched in her lap over her jeans.

"What's your name?" he asked now.

"Joy. Joy Ridel," she answered quickly.

"Tell me, Joy . . . would your mother be glad to see you tonight?"

"I guess she would be surprised. We were going to Las Vegas, Daddy and I. She doesn't expect us until tomorrow night."

"Then no one will be looking for you for awhile, will they?"

She turned and stared at him stupidly. "I guess not..."

"What I mean is this, Joy! You and I can drive off into one of these little desert trails and spend the night. In the morning those road blocks will be gone and we can go on—But tonight..." He stopped and leered at her meaningfully.

God, what a face, he thought as the horror of his words struck her.

"You wouldn't!" she gasped.

He nodded vigorously. "Why not? He stepped on the gas and started ahead again. "There'll be a good place just around that hill, I imagine..."

"No!" she almost screamed. "Oh no! Don't stop—please!"

"I've got to have some proof that you won't say anything to the police at the road block..." He paused menacingly. "Otherwise..."

"I won't say anything!" she promised quickly. "Cross my heart!"

"That isn't good enough!"

She started to cry. "Please, please! Honest I won't say anything."

Mike was thinking. "Tell you what! When we get to the road block you lay your head on my lap. I'll put my left hand under your neck. You make out that your asleep, see? If you so much as open your eyes or mouth I'll squeeze on your carotid artery..." he paused. "Do you know what the carotid artery is?"

She shook her head, vehemently.

He pressed on. "Pressure on the carotid artery causes immediate unconsciousness—then death! You understand?"

"Oh, yes!" she shrilled.

He drove on in silence for about twenty minutes. The lights loomed ahead in the road.

"All right!" he ordered through his teeth. "Get your head down and close those eyes!"

Worldlessly, her face expressing utter horror, she complied. Mike slowed and drew to a stop. He glanced down at her. Her lips trembled and then she forced them still. With here eyes closed she looked very young—scarcely older than Jake. The sickness in the pit of Mike's stomach had became a dull, nameless ache.

The patrolman approached, sweeping the interior of the pickup swiftly and efficiently. Then the back of the truck. He asked to see the driver's license and Mike knew a bad moment.

"You look more than one hundred sixty-five pounds," the patrolman said to Mike, eyeing him. Mike hadn't even seen that driver's license himself yet.

"I've put on some weight lately," answered Mike and wondered where the words came from.

The patrolman was staring down at Joy Ridel on Mike's lap. "What's the matter with her?" he asked.

"Sleeping," answered Mike.

"Okay, go ahead!" the patrolman stepped back and Mike threw the pickup in gear.

"You can raise up now!" he told Joy.

She sat up. "I did just as you wanted!" she reminded him.

"Yes!" "You catch on fast!"

Then she began to talk. She told him about her friends at school, about her parents, her relatives. She chattered like a magpie.

"I don't think gangsters are so bad!" she informed him. "I think they're just like anyone else. Only thing, maybe they've had some bad breaks and turned to a life of crime. Down inside, they're not so different."

He grunted. I wish she'd shut up... I've got to think.

They were coming to another road block. "All right! Get your head in my lap again," Mike ordered.

"But..."

"Hurry up!" he growled. She obeyed.

The patrolman went over the car. He looked at the driver's license. "You'd better get this renewed," he told Mike and waved him ahead.

Mike said, "Officer, do you recall a blue station wagon with two men, a woman and a little boy within the last two hours?"

"Perhaps," answered the patrolman.

"I'm with them on this trip," Mike explained. "I lost them and don't know which road they would be taking..."

"They went on south," answered the patrolman. "Toward Needles. About thirty minutes ago."

"Thanks, Officer!"

On the way again Joy raised up her head. "What did you ask him that for?"

"None of your business!" he told her curtly.

But she wasn't afraid anymore. "You're confederates!" she said. "They're in it with you!"

"In what with me?" he demanded.

"In whatever you've done!" "Did you get a big haul?"

"No!" he said. "Shut up, will you!"

But she went on. And on and on!

The lights of Needles sprang up from the abyss of darkness, appearing and disappearing with the turns and dips. Mike looked at the gas gauge and made some mental computations. Not enough to get to Vidal but he didn't want to stop at Needles. Not with this girl who might be recognized. He thought about the junction south where Highway 66 cut off from 95. They could probably make it there.

"We turn off left at the next crossing!" Joy said.

"What for?" Mike was growing very tired of her chatter—of her bright inanities.

"My home. About three miles now."

"What makes you think we're going to your home?"

"But you said..."

"I said nothing!"

"But I thought..."

"You *didn't* think!"

She was quiet for a time.

Mike said, "Look, Joy! I can't let you go home. I can't be sure you won't notify the cops! I've got to keep you with me!"

"Gee!" she said. "I'm a hostage!"

"Yes!"

"Are we going to shack up?"

"Shack up?"

"Yes! You and I together in some shack until the heat's off?"

"No!"

"Well, then, what?"

"God! I don't know! Will you shut up?"

Quiet for a few minutes.

"See that service station—the one with the Shell sign?"

"Yes!"

"My uncle runs it!"

"We aren't stopping there!"

"You'll run out of gas. About 10 miles to the gallon is all you get in this old pickup. The new Ford does a lot better, but Daddy wanted to bring back a load so we went in this old one."

Mike suddenly realized that all his money had been in his pocketbook that the thugs took. There had been none in the one he had given to Joy's father. He didn't know if there was any in the one he now had.

"Joy, how much money have we?" he demanded.

"I have seven dollars and Daddy had fifteen and a check from Morrison Construction company for eighty-five dollars. It was his pay check," she contributed.

They were easing out of the town and he pressed more speed into the lumbering pickup. At the junction there was another road block.

"Do you want me to lie on your lap again?"

"Yes!"

She flopped down with such a willingness that Mike flinched. He had the gun tucked back behind him and he gritted his teeth and put his left hand under her neck again. She nestled down, horrifying him.

The patrolman was perfunctory. He asked if Mike had noticed anything along the highway to the north. Mike said no. Then he asked about the blue Mercury station wagon.

"Went south," the Patrolman said. "I remember distinctly because the little boy said that was the way to Mexico and his mamma told him to shut up!" The patrolman sighed. "Folks get mighty touchy after a long day riding in the desert..."

Mike thanked the patrolman and drove on. At Vidal Junction there was no road block. Mike felt a chill of apprehension. But the checking station on the left required a stop anyway.

The man inside with the uniform came out and peered inside. "No fruits or vegetables—no plants?"

"None!" Mike said crossly.

"Where you headed?"

"That depends. I'm following a blue Mercury station wagon. Four people. Do you remember it?"

The man nodded. "About twenty minutes ago. They turned east for Parker, Arizona..."

He turned east. Joy popped up from his lap. "What are you going to do when we catch them?"

"I don't know!"

"You ought to have a plan. You're afraid of them, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I can figure it out!"

"How?"

"Well, you haven't any money of your own. That means they ran off with the haul, see?"

"I wish you'd keep still."

"Why?"

"I have to think!"

Every year Mike and Helen and Jake had gone east on highway 60-70 to Blythe, California from their home in Los Angeles. They would spend one day of their precious vacation with Helen's mother who lived in a little town on the southern Colorado river. Then they'd move on to Las Vegas for a day, then to the Grand Canyon, Bryce and Zion, up to Salt Lake City—then west again via Reno, San Francisco, down the coast and home. It required their full two weeks and amply exhausted their funds and energies.

This event—the thugs and the car switch and all—came on the night of their second day, about one hundred and fifty miles up Highway 95. Mike knew the highway fairly well but he had never gone east from Vidal Junction, crossing the Colorado into Parker, Arizona. This part of the country was unfamiliar to him, but Joy knew it well.

"There are almost no cops in Arizona!" she said.

"Oh?"

"They just have big signs warning you about their unmarked patrol cars directed by radar."

When he didn't answer she went on, "No one will chase you when you hit out from Parker. If you go down to Quartzsite you won't meet any cops at all."

"I don't plan on going that way."

"That's where your gang will head. You'll see!"

"How do you know?"

"It figures. That kid was telling them the way to Mexico—south. Well, there's a better way straight south from Quartzsite. You go through a big government place—a million acres of government testing ground. They don't bother anybody on that highway."

Mike knew about Yuma Test Station along the southwest edge of the Colorado just north of Yuma, Arizona.

"You know so much," he said. "Suppose they want to rest up awhile ... where will they do that?"

"Oh," she said grandly, "anywhere off the road. A few miles back in the hills there are old mine shacks ... places to shack up for days!"

He glanced at her and, seeing the look of self-pleasure on her round face, thought, God, what a screwball I picked for a hostage.

They took the road down to the Colorado and across the bridge into Parker. A small checking station was on the right and in front of it there was an unmarked patrol car.

The officer approached, peered in and asked a few questions. Then he waved them on.

Mike drove on to the first gas station, filled up the car and asked his questions again. No one recalled the blue station wagon.

They were heading east in the desert blackness again. Joy was sound asleep, her head rolling back and forth across his thighs.

Like Jake, he thought, and was stabbed by pain of apprehension because now he had lost the scent. He no longer could be sure he was following the blue station wagon. He drew the pickup over to the roadside and stopped. He looked down at the plump teenage girl who slept on his lap. He realized he'd brought her across two state lines and for the first time since he'd made his decision to chase the thugs on his own, he wondered if he was doing the right thing.

Shouldn't he have gone to the first roadblock in that blood-stained car, told all, requested help? After all, maybe that gunman was only bluffing about what he'd do to Helen and Jake in case of a cop or questions.

Then Mike knew that, rightly or wrongly, he had to continue his course. He couldn't take a chance on Helen and Jake. He had to see to it personally that they were safe, whatever the cost. But he didn't need Joy anymore. Why not let her go?

In his pocket were the seven dollars he had taken from her father. Joy said she had seven more. There was a payroll check which, conceivably, Mike could cash in the morning on his stolen credentials. It was worth a try.

He turned around and drove back into Parker to the first motel. He registered himself as Warren Ridel and daughter, leaving Joy asleep draped over the seat of the pickup. Then he went out and carried her into his cabin. She barely stirred enough to stand, letting him lug her most of the way. Inside, he left her sleeping on one of the beds and then went out, locking the door behind him.

He went down to the motel office and called his boss in Los Angeles.

"Look, Fred, I hate to wake you but I'm in a bad spot. I've got to have money. Will you wire me a hundred as an advance on my salary?"

"A jam? Mike, did you gamble in Vegas?"

"No! I'm in Parker, Arizona. Look, telegraph the money to me in care of the Texaco Service Station. Please, Fred! I'll tell you about it later."

When he came out of the office, he drove the pickup down the street to a big drugstore, went in and bought a roll of adhesive plaster. Then he went out and drove the pickup back to the motel and around to the rear, parking it behind an old garage. He took out the adhesive plaster and tore off a strip. The license plate had white numbers on blue and the middle number was a 3. He used the adhesive tape to make the 3 into an 8.

Then he hiked down to the Texaco station and told them he had asked for some money to be wired there and would they hold it for him. He gave them his right name —Michael Bruce.

Finally he went back to the motel He hardly glanced at Joy, but tumbled on to the other bed. He could not sleep, though. He kept thinking about Helen and Jake. He was thinking of Helen's small, firm body, her warm mouth. He was thinking of those old mine shacks along the hills. Of the two thugs and Helen small and scared.

Sheriff Jack Gregory, of Clark County, Nevada, had a policy that quiet efficiency worked better than front-page so he concentrated on keeping local vice strictly a matter for the county officials.

Within minutes from the time the holdup car—identified only as a light green Buick, model 1956, license plate unknown — passed through Las Vegas and turned South on Highway 95, the Clark County Sheriff's office spotted the body South of Railroad Pass. It had been dragged twenty yards off into the rocks and all identification papers removed. But Nevada highways are smooth, so the body and car marks were easily identified by

the first patrol car going to Searchlight.

The body was that of a large man, about six feet, around sixty or so and dark-skinned. It was tentatively established as that of Charles Gannett, owner of the store which had been robbed at Barstow, California. The two thugs had forced Gannett into their car to stave off the police when they made their getaway. Apparently he had become troublesome.

The road blocks had been set up all the way to Needles, California and the getaway car description was out by 9 P.M. But it is a long road and even at high speed it takes time to patrol it. It was ten-thirty before the car was spotted on the roadside, it's dim lights burning.

It was quite empty but the big patch of blood showed that Charles Gannett had been shot and bled badly before being removed.

On the seat was a billfold containing the identification and other papers of Charles Gannett. Outside the car there were numerous tracks in the sand and evidence of another car having been near. It didn't take long to figure out that this other car probably had stopped with a flat tire and that the two thugs had commandeered it. By 11 P.M. the word was out to check all southbound cars and hold any suspicious characters, warning that hostages might be involved.

By now, too, it had been established that Charles Gannett owned a .22 caliber pistol which could have caused his death.

By eleven thirty it was reported that a rancher had been picked up by a cosmetic salesman, roughly one mile south of the getaway car, and the rancher rode as far as Needles, California.

The rancher had told the salesman that his car had broken down and he was hitch-hiking toward Searchlight for help, but when he found that the salesman was going on through to Needles he decided to leave the car until morning and then go after it himself. He had said he had another car and it would be simpler that way. He had said his name was Ridel—Warren Ridel.

Yes, the salesman had noted a car off the roadside but had thought nothing of it, since people sometimes park off in the desert that way.

By midnight a patrolman called at the small ranch house of Warren Ridel. His wife said, yes, Warren had come home and had taken the new Ford sedan to go after his car . . . she said the car was an old Chevrolet pickup and had broken down.

The patrolman took a snapshot of her husband when he left, and the salesman identified it as the rancher he'd picked up. The police put that lead aside as a bum steer.

By 1:00 A.M. it was conceded by the Clark County Sheriff's office that the thugs had either gone into hiding or driven completely out of the territory.

In the blackness ahead, only the pugnacious beam of strong headlights cut the sense of complete engulfment in despair for Helen Bruce. The light ahead was cutting through—through to another road block and the possibility that somehow the patrolman might catch on this time. That he might get an inkling and act quickly and efficiently!

She sat crumpled in the corner feeling the gun against her like an ache. It was not the gun she feared though—it was the towel around Jake's throat. She had brought that towel along on the trip, an old trick of hers. She would wet it and wring it out at the service stations, then spread it over her bare knees. It made her marvelously cool. But now that towel was very dry, and looped around Jake's throat.

The tall, stooped man, with brownish fine hair had one hand on the loose end of the towel and he had already demonstrated his technique. He simply twisted and Jake fell onto the seat, crumpled. Helen realized that an extra twist and Jake would not rise again; the officer would never know, looking down on the unconscious child. Then all Helen's screams would be in vain and much, much too late.

She had been afraid that would happen when Jake—against very careful directions to the contrary—had piped up about going south to Mexico. But they had let it go—until long past the road block. Then the man beside Helen leaned forward very casually, grabbed Jake by the tuft of black hair—so short and thick and glossy and raised him off the seat a foot.

"Keep your mouth shut like we told ya!" he said calmly to Jake and dropped him.

Jake began to whimper and Helen commanded "Hush!" in such tones that Jake hushed, crumpling down in the seat. There were no more sounds, no more questions.

Just before they arrived in Parker, however, the tall, stooped man, who was driving, shook Jake and told him to sit up. Then he had put the towel around Jake's throat with his free hand.

"We just leave the towel in place around your neck, kid!" he said. "I keep my hand on it right behind your neck, see?" He glanced back to Helen and then at the road ahead. "Now, we'll show your mother what will happen if either of you try anything."

Then he gave the quick little twist and Helen saw Jake crumple down again. She heard him gasping and coughing but he neither cried nor spoke.

She tried to think about her husband—what he'd be likely to do. But what could he do in her behalf? The answer pounded against her ears—nothing!

Helen knew then, she would have to act for herself and her son. But how?

There are two things a woman

may do. She may try to overpower her captors or she may outwit them. But, being slight of build and unarmed, she had to try the latter.

When a woman outwits a man she uses her sex. Quite simple! Play one thug against the other. But which? Which was the safer—or perhaps the more gullible?

The one called Nick on the right of her, holding the gun, had leaned back in the seat. His eyes were closed. He had a longish face and beardless, clear skin. His brows were thick and black and covered over his nose. The nose was thin, with wide nostrils. The brow was sloping and the ears small. The mouth was a thin line and wide—neither sensual nor tender. She looked at his hands, the one on the gun. They were long, agile fingers —competent.

There was neither weakness nor tenderness about him. He would kill as part of the job. She doubted if he would slip because of a woman.

She could see only the back of the driver's, Al's head—the fine hair, sort of lifeless, but not thin. She looked at the bony structure over the ears, which flared outwards and showed signs of beatings. The hunch of big shoulders, making an ape-like appearance. She leaned forward and looked at the hands on the steering wheel — short, stubby fingers, the knuckles covered with reddish hairs. The thumb was squat and blunted on the ends. Within herself she cringed. But she knew this one must be the one she played with her sex.

They were going east from Parker. It was a little after eleven. The slight haziness in the sky which obscured the stars and added a weight of humidity to the hot air, made the envelope of blackness terror-filled for Helen. Jake slept—or at least she hoped he slept.

Al said, "Say, I'm getting hungry. Anything to eat in this wagon?"

Helen prodded herself—her first try at pleasing Al. "There's a can of tomato juice and soda crackers—a wedge of cheese. I hope you like your cheese sharp."

She knew Nick had opened his eyes and that she was getting a questioning look from him. She laughed just a little—trying to make it sound casual and friendly.

"Sounds okay!" Al answered. "Where is it? I'm starved."

Helen turned and began to rummage behind her seat under the blankets they always took on their trips. She knew Nick was on the alert though he said nothing. She got the cheese and crackers and opened the tomato juice.

After that she couldn't resist calling to Jake. "Come on, dear! Here's some for you!"... But she had managed to serve Al well and first.

Nick helped himself, casually.

When Jake did not rise she called to him again. Al put a hand on the child, shaking him. "Hey! Wake up!"

Jake sat up. "I don't want any, thank you!" The tears were behind the words but Helen did not dare speak kindly to him lest it break him down.

"Eat it!" Al ordered harshly.

Helen gave the small sandwich of cheese and crackers to her son. He took it from her and stuffed it into his mouth. He drank from the paper cup she offered. Then he slumped down onto the seat again and was still.

At the sign pointing south, a graveled road forked down into the limitless desert. The station wagon drew to a halt and the two men deliberated.

"Think we can get to the border this way, Nick?"

"Yep," agreed Nick.

"The sign said 'Quartzsite 24 miles.' Guess we can gas up there, huh?"

Nick stirred himself and shoved the gun tighter against Helen. How much we got left?"

About a fourth of a tank. I wonder how far to Yuma?"

Nick yawned and looked out into the darkness. "I wouldn't know. Say, you got a road map?" he turned to Helen.

"In the car pocket," she answered.

"Well, hell! Why didn't you say so before?" Al demanded.

"I'm sorry!" answered Helen meekly. "I guess I just supposed you knew the country—the way you drive and all, as if you were really familiar with the road..."

"What do you mean 'the way I drive'?"

She gave a little laugh (charming laugh she hoped). "Why, nothing, only that you drive so well—confident and sure—as if you were used to driving long distances at high speeds!"

Nick looked at her, raising the brim of his hat slightly.

Al said, "Well, I guess I can drive a car all right!"

Nick studied the map. "We'd better get gas at Quartzsite. It's over a hundred miles to Yuma from here."

The car hit the graveled road and bounced over the rough ground. There was a cloud of dust behind them which, Helen thought, would pretty nearly obliterate the tail lights. She wondered if anyone could follow down this road—any policemen or Michael! It seemed the jumping off place—the end of the world.

Then, shortly after midnight—she saw the tread of lights on the left and right. Soon the neons of a small town loomed ahead.

"Cripes! a highway!" cursed Nick. "We're going to have to cross sixty and seventy here and look at that traffic!"

"We gotta get gas!" reminded Al.

They approached the intersection slowly. Al stopped behind some rundown tourist cabins.

"Can you see if there are any cops from here?"

"You'd better get out and walk up there," Nick told him.

Al switched off the ignition and lights, looking down on the seat at Jake. Then he got out and walked up to the highway from among the old cabins.

After a time he returned. "There's a road block all right," he told Nick. "Two cops are up at that service station across the road on the left. They've got a line of cars a block long."

Nick thought for a time. "Well, Madam here will do the driving!" he decided. "You and I and the kid will walk."

He prodded Helen gently with the gun. "We'll meet you about a block down on the road. It crosses the main highway right here and goes on down. We'll take your kid!" He paused and thought some more.

"Just in case you want to tell those cops something and think you can get by with it, I'll be standing right there in back of that service station. They aren't looking for any guys on foot. But I'll be where I can see and hear. I'll know, see? And if I wave my arm up and down like so..." he lifted his right arm and swung it in a circle, "then Al will choke the kid with the towel—right then and there! See?"

Helen looked squarely into his eyes, under the half-closed lids. "Don't worry! Please don't worry about me!" she said.

Nick grunted. Al got Jake and jerked him out. "Come on, Kid!"

Helen got out stiffly and got behind the wheel. She waited for the three others to disappear among the cabins.

After a time she started the motor and drove across the intersection. A cop waved her down and she stopped. She saw a dark figure dart behind the buildings and then she saw him fasten tightly against the off wall of the station. It was Nick all right and he was well within seeing and hearing distance. The lights of the station glared mercilessly down.

The patrolman approached her. "Just by yourself, Ma'am!"

"Yes!" she said loud and clear.

He looked the car over carefully. "Well, go ahead."

She stepped so suddenly on the gas that the car lurched a little. She crossed into the right lane of the south road and drove down about a block. She stopped. She opened her purse quickly and withdrew a yellow silk scarf.

Al jumped in the back seat, jerking Jake along. He slammed the door. Nick was alongside of her and Helen moved over at once, the scarf balled tightly in her hand.

He pushed in beside her. "Cripes! Why didn't you get gas?"

"Oh, I forgot!" Helen said. It was the truth. She had forgotten. Her hand was out the window.

Al uttered a long line of curses. Nick bore down on the road ahead. "Pretty good little trick, Sister. But it won't help you! I heard a guy say there's a little station about

thirty miles down. We'll fill up there!" Nick stated. "You'd better not try any more tricks!"

"But it wasn't on purpose!" Helen insisted. "You've got me as afraid of those cops as you are. I just forgot!" She let go the balled scarf in her hand.

"Skip it!" growled Nick.

The scarf floated down and the wind swept it back up the highway.

In a short time the headlights defined a sign which designated the area: U. S. Government Military Reservation. Then nothing more; just miles and miles of desert. However, from point to point, a side road, took off to the right or left of the highway. The night was velvet black and only the occasional clump of paloverde or ironwood, broke the endlessness of the highway. The dips, almost cruel at a speed above fifty miles, jolted them and Al cursed. "Take it easy," he snarled at Nick. "Better let me drive if you don't know how!"

And Helen knew that he had taken her flattery about his driving, so she resolved to give him some more bait at the earliest opportunity.

It was a little after one A.M. by the clock on the dash, and Helen saw the gas gage indicator was hovering close to empty. Lights to the right kept bobbing into view and the service station Nick had expected developed. Except for the two outside lights however, it was dark.

"Closed!" Nick said in disgust.

"We could get them up." Al said.

"No. We'll drive down the road a ways and go off onto the next side road for the night. Can't risk any extra attention like waking a guy up."

There was a curve around a clump of sharp hills. The car coasted on a dugway, down and around. The desert became more lush and rocky. There was a bare marking of jeep tracks off to the left. Nick swung onto these and the car growled through sand and rocks and stopped under a small cliff. Nick turned off the motor and got out.

"A good spot. We can't be seen from the highway."

"What are we going to do now?" Al demanded.

"Get some sleep!" Nick replied, curtly.

Helen said, "We can put this back seat down and make a bed in the back with the blankets."

There was a dead silence. "Yeah?" Al said experimentally.

"Okay!" Nick said. "Let's get with it!"

Helen got out and then Nick and Al. Jake was asleep on the back seat. Helen quickly lifted him out. He stood beside her, clutching her legs.

They got the seat down and Helen began to spread out the bed —the air mattress was on the bottom. "We need to blow this up," she said.

Al said, "We can't all sleep on that space."

"We'll take turns," Nick said. "One of us has to stay on guard."

"Whose going to be on guard first?"

"You will."

"And you and her will lay down there?"

"Yep! And the kid on the front seat! I get two hours then you get until time to go back to that gas station. Six o'clock will be alright to go down to that station without drawing attention."

"I don't see why anybody has to stay on guard. We could hear a car if it comes and you can fix it so she won't go wandering around. Tie her feet together."

Nick thought this over. "Okay, I guess. Only it's too crowded in here for three. You'll have to take a blanket and lay out there." He pointed to a flat spot behind the car.

"Why me? Why not you? I figure she likes me as well as you and I got it coming. You're always first in everything."

"I got my reasons!" Nick said crossly.

"Yeah! I'll bet!"

Nick was exasperated. He walked over to Al and put his hand before Al's face. "Can't trust you, that's why. She'll play you for a sucker, see?"

"Listen, Nick! I'll give you a share of my cut for it. How's that?" Al was wheedling now.

"You're a damned fool!"

"You don't kid me none!"

"I said, you're a fool." Nick was walking toward the car. He turned to Helen where she stood clutching Jake.

"Get the kid on the front seat and pile in here in back. I'm about out of patience."

Helen lifted Jake onto the seat and kissed him quickly. "Go to sleep, dear! Everything will be alright in the morning." She wished she could believe it.

She climbed in back and lay down, close to the side of the car. Her heart was beating furiously and she was sick with fear. Al leaped in beside her.

Nick stood looking in menacingly.

"Let her decide, Nick!" Al said. "Which one of us do you want, baby? Come on, you pick which one!"

For the life of her—for all her reasons and her resolutions—Helen could not answer him. She buried her head against her knees and the revulsion swept over her in waves.

Nick said, "Get it over with then," and moved away.

Al's hand touched Helen's shoulder and then moved downward.

She screamed, "Stop it!" and rose up, tearing at him like a wildcat, raking his face, kicking and sobbing.

He struggled with her shortly. Then Nick was in it, pulling Al back and out of the car.

"It isn't the time, Al!" he said tiredly. "We're only a hundred yards from the highway!"

"The little bitch!" Al cursed. "I'll fix her. She bit me—the little bitch!"

Nick climbed in back. He said to Helen. "Just keep over to that side. I want a little sleep, see?"

Helen lay quietly hearing Nick's snore and Al's grunting as he rolled over outside on the rough ground. All was still—very still. She stirred, experimentally. She raised up. Instantly Nick had her neck in an iron vise.

"Do I have to tie you?" he demanded in a hoarse tone.

"No!" she whispered back. "No, no!"

Then she knew it was no use—she could never go leaving Jake with them and she couldn't get away with Jake. She lay back and felt the utter exhaustion of defeat.

It was very early in the morning of August 22. It was not yet light, though the cloudiness had gone and the stars shone brilliantly. Mike Bruce looked at the radium dial on his watch and stretched his aching muscles. Perhaps he had slept but it didn't seem like it. There had been a million sounds in the night —cars passing, stopping, voices. It was 4:30 A.M.

The teen age girl in the next bed, however, slept soundly, her face cherubic.

Mike arose from the bed and put on his shoes—he had never removed his clothing. He very quietly opened the door and locked it with the key from the outside.

On his way to the motel office he noticed the new Ford sedan parked in the unit next to his. It was two tone white and red and bore a California license plate.

The office was closed though the vacancy sign still was in place.

Mike wondered if the money he had asked Fred, his boss, to send had arrived. He walked down to the Texaco station, gratified to see it bore an open-all-night sign. The attendant inside, a school boy who had been dozing, looked uncertainly at Mike.

"Oh, yeah! You're the guy who was waiting for a telegram. Well, it just came. Mr. Michael Bruce, huh?"

Mike nodded and tore open the telegram.

It read, SORRY MIKE CAN'T GO ALONG WITH YOUR GAMBLING YOU WILL HAVE USE FOR THAT HUNDRED WHEN YOU GET HOME (signed) FRED.

Mike stood very still looking at the telegram. Fred would be like that, of course. Lacking an explanation of why Mike needed the money he had assumed that—since Mike was due to be in Las Vegas, if he needed money it was because he was gambling.

Mike walked back around the block to the back alley where he had parked the black pickup. He noted, with satisfaction, that it was unnoticeable in its spot behind the old sheds.

Mike stood under the neon of the motel and pulled out his acquired bill fold. He studied the driver's license and noted that it had expired, as the policeman had warned at the road block. He looked at the payroll check from Morrison Construction company of Needles, California. Then he memorized the Warren Ridel's signature on the driver's license. He walked back up into the town and entered the bar and cafe which was open.

He bought coffee. The woman who waited on him looked tired and in need of sleep. He began to talk to her.

"What happened to that road block they had here about midnight?" he asked.

"They broke it up," she told him. "Decided it was too late or that the holdup men had gone another way."

"You didn't hear anything on the radio—no news?"

"No, nothing!"

"Let's hear if there's anything now," he suggested casually.

"There won't be anything on until five," she told him. "I don't think they caught them yet. Bill Price — he's the patrolman here — was just in and he said they hadn't yet."

Mike asked for another cup of coffee and a doughnut. The coffee was thick and syrupy and barely warm but he forced himself to drink it.

"Where can I get a payroll check cashed?" he asked.

She eyed him. "Where from?"

"Needles... bank at Needles from Morrison Construction company."

"You from Needles?"

He nodded. "Yes. Ridel is my name, Warren Ridel." He waited not knowing what to expect. It was very possible that a rancher at Needles might be known in Parker.

She said, "They cash payroll checks at the Lodge bar. You might try there. You'd better have some identification, though..."

He thanked her and left. He thought he'd better be in the pickup when he went to try the Lodge. The pickup looked like it belonged to a local rancher—all that loose stuff in back. He walked back to the motel to check on Joy.

The light in the east was strengthening. He woke Joy and told her they'd be pulling out soon. She grunted, covered her head, and went to sleep again. He shook her. Finally she sat up, blinking, holding the sheet under her chin.

"We're still on the lam, aren't we?" she said, as though she were asking, "It's Christmas, isn't it?"

He hustled her out and she stood a moment in hesitation outside the motel. "Come on!" he ordered. "If you want to eat before we hit the road."

She followed him around the block and into the pickup. He backed out and drove around to the

Lodge. He parked in front and turned to Joy. "I've got to cash your Dad's check. Are you going to behave yourself so I can buy you some breakfast?"

She sighed and yawned. "I don't think you'd better stop for breakfast."

"Why not?"

"Because Daddy is back at that motel. He might get up and see the pickup and you'd be caught."

He stared at her.

"That was our red and white Ford parked there. I'd know it anywhere," she told him.

"Oh Lord!" he moaned.

She was chattering on. "He's come to get me but he didn't tell any cops or they'd have stopped us. He was afraid to squeal to the cops because of what you said you'd do to me. But he's after me and if he catches up he'll kill you because he had the rifle in back and he's a very good shot!"

Mike knew he'd have to get some money for gas somehow. Inside the Lodge he saw a man in uniform dimly and recognized the patrolman of the night before.

The patrolman was talking to the clerk at the desk. "So the way I figure is these two mugs dumped off the body of that Gannett fellow and then heisted another car. That way they got through the road blocks. You can't check everybody with vacation traffic like it is..."

Mike studied the patrolman, he said, "what did you say, officer?"

The patrolman, eager for a new audience launched into his account at once. He told Mike everything about the robberies, the murder, the chase. He described the hold-up men. Expounded on his personal theories!

Mike decided that he was clearly not one to be trusted with the knowledge that Mike held. He would surely bungle things when the showdown came. No — Helen and Jake's life depended on there being no bungling. Mike had broken the law to such an extent now that he dare not turn himself in.

So he pulled out the payroll check and asked the clerk to cash it.

The clerk stared at it for some time. He stared at the driver's license. He said to the patrolman, "Bill, you know any Ridel in Needles?"

The officer nodded. "Cash Ridel runs the Shell station there. I know him."

"You know Warren Ridel?"

The patrolman shook his head.

At that moment Joy came in. She walked up to Mike confidently —a sly grin on her face, her off-eye wandering, giving her an ultra-canny look. She said, "Can't you get it cashed, Warren?"

Mike stared at her.

She turned to the clerk and then to the patrolman, a suggestive little smile on her half-open mouth. "Shouldn't be any trouble," she told them. "Warren is my cousin and

we live in Needles and Cash Ridel, is my uncle and he runs a service station. He has light hair and one finger shot off in the war. I go to the high school and the principal's name is Mr. Goodman and his wife was married before to Dueno Castro and he has the Castro grocery store . . ." she paused for breath. Then, "Our school licked Parker on the last game of basketball of the season and the score of the last one was twenty-to-two. The basketball coach in Parker is named William Foster and his wife used to live in Needles and her name was Ruth Wallset . . ."

"That will do," said the Clerk. "I'll cash the check, Mr. Ridel."

Mike scrawled the name Warren Ridel, as nearly as he could, to resemble the same signature on the driver's license.

He walked out with the cash, gassed up at the Union Oil station and started east again. Joy was sitting up proudly beside him, the one near eye wandering cunningly.

"I guess I better say thanks," Mike said gruffly.

"Oh, you'll have to pay for it!" she said enigmatically.

"Pay? How?" he asked.

"I'll just take a fourth of the haul for it! One fourth . . ."

"How do you figure that? I told you there is no haul."

"I heard about that mess of hold-ups," she told him. "It was on the radio before Daddy and I left last night. You and your buddies got about twenty-seven hundred altogether." She paused. "But I want a fourth for mine. I figure there are the three of you men and me. The woman doesn't need any nor that kid."

She pursed her lips and popped them open again, as if she were popping bubble gum. "Hey, what did you get a little kid into it for? That's dumb!"

"It wasn't my idea," he told her wearily.

She nodded. "I guess not! You must have got outsmarted on it—letting the others get away with the haul like that."

"I guess so!" he agreed. They rode in silence for a time.

The day was now full upon the desert and the first rays of sun cut through blindingly into the pickup. Mike had been doing some tall thinking.

He said, "Joy, I think I'd better tell you the truth."

"Okay!" she responded, expecting something juicy.

"I'm not one of the hold-up men," he began. "I'm just a poor tourist who was fixing a flat tire. Myself and my wife, Helen, and my little boy, Jake—aged seven . . ."

"So?"

"So these two thugs came along in that car you saw and they pulled out a gun, forced my wife and boy to go with them. They took my wallet and left me theirs and that car. They said they'd kill my wife and son the first time a cop stopped

them or asked too many questions..."

"Well," Joy said in disgust. "Well, I never! Just the same trick you pulled on us!"

"The same one," Mike agreed. "I figured if it worked so well for them I could pull it myself. Only now I've brought you against your will across two state lines. I stole your father's car and forged a check. I failed to report the robbery of my car or to inform the police about those thugs! You can see I'm in kind of a mess!"

"You sure are! And here I thought I'd really have something to tell my friends about being held hostage by those killers!"

Mike sighed. "I wish I knew if my wife and son were safe. I wish they were as safe as you have been!"

Joy looked at him thoughtfully. "Where do you think they are now?"

"I have no idea. We're going this way because you suggested it," he said and grinned a little at her.

This perked her up visibly. "Well, now I think we ought to make that south turn toward Quartzsite. There are so many places they could hide out that way and it's on the road to Mexico. I'll bet we can track them down."

"Thanks, Joy!" Mike said, and gratitude was in his voice.

"Only we'll have to watch out for Daddy! He'll shoot first and ask questions later. If he sees this pickup on the road he'll blow out the tires with his rifle and we'll have a devil of a time with him!"

"The first town we hit I'm putting you on a bus and sending you home!" Mike said. "I think I can trust you to keep still about things until I have a chance to save my wife and son—can't I?"

She thought this over. "I'd rather stick with you!"

"You're very brave!" he said. "But it will be better the other way. I don't know if I'll even find them. Tell you what— if you don't hear from me by tomorrow night then you can go to the police and tell them everything."

"But what about your wife and little boy? If I tell them those men will kill your wife and boy... they said they would..."

"I know. But if I haven't found them by then it will be too late. I know those mugs won't hold onto them that long. They'd have no reason and Jake would be such a nuisance. I'll be very lucky if they're still alive when I catch up to them!"

Then he recalled what the man at the checking stand at Vidal junction had said about the little boy mentioning Mexico and his mother scolding him for it. At least they were alive until then!

He fanned the small glimmer of hope and took the road South toward Quartzsite as Joy had advised.

The crossing of Arizona 95 and U.S. 60-70 loomed ahead. There

was no road block, no patrolmen in sight. Mike awakened Joy.

"Here's where you get off, kid!" he said. "Sorry! But you can catch a bus and go home from here."

"I want to go with you—to help!"

He shook his head. "No!"

He gave her twenty of the original eighty dollars. "That will take care of you. I will pay your dad back for everything when I can."

She was pouting, turning her head away and pouting. He ignored it. She got out of the pickup and, without a backward look, went into the nearest cafe and service station.

He crossed the highway. He entered the other side and proceded south. The sign said YUMA 85 miles, and another said YUMA TEST STATION 65 miles. A million acres of wild desert belonged to the government testing site, Mike remembered.

Then he saw something along the road. It was a small yellow piece of material and the wind had lodged it in a greasewood clump. He stopped and went over and picked it up. Helen had had that scarf in her purse to keep her hair from blowing. He hurried back into the pickup and pressed on the accelerator, new determination burning within him.

It was six thirty in the morning, Pacific Daylight Saving time. A tan Pontiac two-door hardtop pulled into the Shell station at Needles, California. A dapper young man ordered a complete servicing. He got out of his car and walked about the station. The radio was on blaring the news.

"The two hold-up men are still at large but it has been determined that they passed this way, in all likelihood trying to make it south to the border. Their abandoned hold-up car was found on Highway 95 above Searchlight. The body of the murdered store owner, Mr. Charles Gannett was recovered late last evening..."

The dapper young man approached the Service station man and said, "Quite something about those hold-up fellows making it through all the road blocks, wasn't it?"

"Guess they must have switched cars," the Service station man said. His name was Cash Ridel.

The dapper young man said, "I picked up a fellow last night. Said he'd broke down just about that section where they found that abandoned car." He paused. Then, "I brought him all the way to Needles but he got out and hiked off somewhere." He paused again for emphasis. "Said he had a ranch hereabouts. Said his pickup had broken down and he had to get his other car and go after it this morning."

"That so? What was his name, did he say?"

"Ridel—Warren Ridel!"

Cash Ridel straightened up from pouring in the quart of Quaker State oil. "That would be my brother," he said.

"Well what do you know? Say, isn't that a coincidence, though?"

Cash Ridel wore a puzzled frown. "Funny about Warren breaking down," he muttered. "You'd think he'd have called me. He could take the wrecker. Did he say anything about Joy—that's his fourteen year old daughter? Where did he leave her?"

The salesman shook his head. "Didn't mention having a daughter. I assumed it was just himself."

"Hmmn! Well, they stopped in here before leaving to gas up. Joy was already to stay with her aunt for a week. She goes to Vegas quite often and stays with her aunt. Wonder what made her change her mind?"

The salesman tried a few more leading ideas but Cash had ceased to communicate. Another car had driven up. The salesman left.

It was seven o'clock and Cash Ridel called up the ranch. "Flo? This is Cash! Say what happened last night?"

"What do you mean, Cash?" Her voice sounded high and funny.

"I mean about Warren breaking down. How come he never called for the wrecker or something..."

There was a long silence then, "Well—well, he just went back by himself. He took the Ford."

"Oh! Well, he might have called me. I'd have been glad to help. By the way, how come Joy decided not to go?"

"Well she just didn't want to."

"Well, that'll please Liz. She wanted to get Joy to help her can some peaches. Do you mind if she comes out first thing to get Joy."

"No, No! Don't come out. I mean Joy isn't feeling well. I'm keeping her in bed."

In about thirty minutes Cash called his wife and told her the story. "I think you'd better take a run out and see what's the matter with Joy!" he finished. "You know what a flutter-budget Flo is. She wouldn't know whether Joy needed the doctor or not. You're level headed and could tell right away."

At nine-thirty Liz drove into the service station. "Guess what!" she told Cash soberly. "Warren was held up by a thug last night and his pick-up stolen. Joy was taken as a hostage. The thug told Warren he'd kill Joy at the first show of a cop. Warren was forced to exchange billfolds and identification with the fellow. He left that hold-up car for Warren but Warren started to hitch-hike. He thumbed a ride and got home. He took the Ford and went south chasing that hold-up fellow and Joy all by himself."

"For God's sake! Why didn't Flo call the police?"

"Afraid to. That fellow meant business Warren said! He'd kill Joy if the police showed! Warren figured he wouldn't know the Ford and he could sneak up on him some way. He could overtake the old pick-up easy. He took the rifle," she finished.

"It's still better to tell the police! He forgot you can call in the FBI if someone crosses the stateline with a kidnapped person. The FBI are real smart about these things . . ."

"I guess Warren didn't think of that. Flo made me promise not to tell the police either. She's worried sick."

Cash went to the telephone and called the sheriff and asked him to send someone to hear his story firsthand.

It took awhile to make the proper connections. Cash thought it advisable to talk personally to the FBI and so it was after eleven before the thing was set-up right. The young agent who came chided him severely for his brother not having gone to the local authorities.

"Don't you see the girl is no safer even if no one ever accosts that criminal? Don't you see that he will probably kill her the minute it becomes convenient?"

"So he goofed!" admitted Cash. "I guess we all goofed!"

Then he called for his assistant, phoned Liz and took off south in the new pink Olds.

Helen was looking out of the station wagon at the desert sky. She saw the sky clear and, one by one, the stars come out. Then she saw the faint lifting of darkness in the east and knew both hope and panic. The hope came for the end of the night only, the panic from what daylight must bring.

It was growing into her consciousness the certainty that each passing hour brought her closer to the inevitable moment when the two thugs would have done with her and her small son. There would be the moment of decision when they would weigh the advantages against the disadvantages and the disadvantages would loom greater.

Bringing the car through that road block at Quartzsite around one A.M. had saved the two of them this long. It had been evidence to the two gunmen that, as yet, Mike had not reported the affair and the blue Mercury was not yet marked by the police.

Helen reasoned that they would keep them alive until they had gassed up again at the little station they had passed but a mile or so back on the highway. But it was not likely that she would live to accompany them as far south as Yuma and for the attempted run into Mexico at San Luis. Here, in this part of the desert, they would decide to kill her and her child. It would be easy to dispose of the evidence.

So she knew if she were going to act at all it must be soon.

Mike Bruce always kept a water bag on the car and now Helen sat up and reached for it outside the rear window where it hung suspended from a hook Mike had arranged. She took the towel that Jake had had around his throat for a restraint and dampened it with

water. Then she took out her comb and ran it through her hair. Nick was watching her.

"You're wasting your time!" Nick told her dryly.

She rubbed her face vigorously with the damp towel. Then she put on lipstick, looking in the small mirror from her purse.

"Do you think so?" she answered and was surprised at herself—those sarcastic tones! Or did she just feel it was hopeless?

No, she must never give up hope! Not for Jake's sake.

Al groaned and got up. He looked in at Helen. Then he looked at Nick.

"Did you have a nice time?" he demanded sourly.

"Wouldn't you like to know!" Nick said.

Al grabbed Nick's arm. "Come on, tell me! How was she?"

Nick wheeled on Al and there was a snarl in his voice. "Can't you think of anything but your guts? We've got things to do—we got to get gas and get across the border. Maybe the place is lousy with cops! That's what you've got to think of—not that dame!"

Helen woke Jake. He sat up and began to whimper. She held him to her. "Hush, dear! You must not cry!" He quieted immediately.

"Mama!" he whispered, his arms clinging around her neck. "When can Daddy find us?"

"I hope soon, dear," she answered, her heart like a rock.

She led Jake around where Nick stood. "I need to take him for a walk," she flushed and looked downward.

Nick eyed her studiously. "Go off over there," he pointed to the east where there were rocks and clumps of ironwood. "We'll be watching," he added.

Then he removed his gun from his pocket and began to check it.

Al's eyes, small and brownish, followed after Helen and Jake as they walked.

Amongst the rocks—only partially screened by the ironwood—Helen leaned down and talked in Jake's ears. "Listen, dear It's very, very important that you do exactly as I say. Do you understand Mama?"

He nodded.

"Unless we do something, those men will kill us!"

He shrank back, the stark fear in his eyes boring into her.

"Now, I have a plan—just like in a television show! I'll leave you here and walk back to the car. When you hear me call HELP real loud then you sneak quickly up to the highway. You must go that way (she pointed north through a wash) and stay out of sight. Sneak through the rocks and run like a fox."

"What will you do, Mama?" he whispered.

"I will run back the other way toward the highway. I will yell HELP, HELP and run that way.

The men will go after me and not see you. That will give you a chance to get away, see?"

"But suppose they shoot you . . ."

"They won't," she hoped! "They need me for awhile yet. They need to keep me until they get gas for the car. They will probably make me go get the gas for them."

"But what if that Al forgets and shoots anyway?"

"Nick won't let him hurt me yet!" Helen insisted. "Now don't forget, dear! No matter what happens—no matter what you hear and even if they shoot and everything, *you must not stop!* You must keep going. It's our only chance."

"Mama, I'm afraid!" his small hand was clutching her skirt.

"You must not be afraid!" she said so sternly that he believed her. "You will be brave—like Roy Rogers! You will be brave and keep running. When you are a long way up there you will go to the highway and if there aren't any cars coming you will keep running until you come to that service station. When you get there tell the man to help us—to call the police. If there is a car coming, you must flag it down. Stand in the road and wave your arms."

She kissed him quickly and turned around to go back to the car. Walking back she wondered at herself. Fear had gone out of her and time stretched out endlessly—as endless as the desert. She walked slowly to give Jake plenty of time to be ready—to plot his course.

When she got within a few feet of the car she suddenly bolted off to the right, running, leaping, stumbling toward the highway above. She yelled at the top of her voice—beaming her call in the direction of the highway, "HELP! HELP!" She kept going forward, stumbling. Perhaps there would be a car passing—perhaps someone would hear.

Al wheeled on Nick, "Don't shoot her, Nick—not yet!" he almost begged it.

"Get her then!" growled Nick.

He stood and watched while Al scrambled after Helen—watched until Helen fell gasping, Al lunging at her.

Watched while Al, prone upon Helen, tore off her blouse exposing the white of her brassiere. Heard the loudness of their breathing, the funny gasping groans made by Al!

Then he turned and looked back from where Helen and Jake had been. Looked and then walked down that way, searching the landscape his hand shading his eyes. Then cursing in dismay!

Helen lay breathing heavily, looking at Al, at the silly passion on his face, hearing the foolish talk he uttered. She did not move.

Then she saw Nick above them, Nick shaking Al by the collar and Nick yelling, "Get up, you damned idiot! The kid got away!"

Al was slow. He backed away, still looking down at Helen. Nick had his gun out, the barrel close to Helen, pointing down at her. "I ought to kill you now!" he said. "But I need you for awhile yet. But your moment will come little smart girl – your moment will come!"

Al said, "where the hell did the kid go?"

"How should I know? You let her fool you completely. The kid got away and no telling how long he's been gone. Probably up on the highway by now. Get up there and keep out of sight. But get that kid!"

"Why can't you go after the kid and let me watch her?"

Nick's lips curled in disgust. "Because she'd get your gun and kill you while you were drooling over her–that's why!"

Al turned and began to walk down where Helen and Jake had been. He looked in all directions.

Don't look north! Look south! Helen willed.

Al stumbled along aimlessly through the rocks. Nick watched awhile. Then he walked in the eastern direction where Helen had taken Jake earlier, and where Al was scrambling through the rocks and dry brush, cursing.

"Al!" Nick shouted. "Come on back and watch her and the car. I'll find the kid!" Then he turned back toward Helen. He said in measured, exact tones, "If I don't get the kid right away I'll let Al at you . . ." he paused, eyeing her. "It might make a difference, too. You see Al spent time in the pen for criminal attack on a woman. He left her for dead!"

Helen just stood staring. She was thinking, what difference could it possibly make in the end!

Al shouted, "Hey, I found his shirt!" He was waving something red–Jake's T-shirt. Helen looked and her blood curdled. Could Jake have run south instead of north?

She was sick with foreboding, watching as Nick went south. She could run to the highway herself now–it was her chance. But fear for Jake stopped her. He must have gone down into the gully.

Jake was down low behind the pale verde clump watching his mother walk back toward the car and the two men. He could see them standing and waiting.

His mother walked slowly. He held his breath while he waited. He knew which way he was going to run. There was a sort of rock ledge just north and sandstone layers underneath. Even then he would have to go almost on all fours, like a donkey, to keep out of sight. He had on a red shirt and this was bad, the men with the guns would see him. So, quickly he peeled off his red T-shirt.

Now his mother was nearly at the car. She was going to yell real loud but he held his breath listening anyway. He shook the red

shirt and held it ready to throw it in the other direction. That way they would think he had run down into the gully where all the big bushes were.

Then he saw his mother start to run. She ran ahead of the car and up the tracks the car had made around the rock pile. She stumbled and almost fell, then she ran again. Then he saw her lift her arms and heard her yell, "HELP! HELP!" He heard it very plain.

His hand balled up the T-shirt and he threw it to the south with all his strength. He saw that both the men were looking at his mother now and that the big one was running after her.

Swift as a fox he ran, on all fours, over and through the rocks northward. When he got beyond the ledge and amongst the piles of sandstone he stood up. No one was coming after him. He ran and ran, leaping from rock to rock.

From time to time he looked back. He could see no one and then, panting, he stopped and listened. There was not a sound except his breathing. He saw he had not even made tracks—stepping on the rocks along the way. Then he kept running and resting and listening. He did not know how far he was from the road but he kept going north. He knew the road was to his left but he feared going on it yet. Maybe the men would get the car and race up the road looking. So he stayed in the gullys, walking and stopping and listening.

Then he turned left and west, and walked. Up through rocks and bushes. And there it was—the winding length of black highway. He could see it for miles. There were no cars. Then, ahead of him, to the left he saw the service station.

He ran toward it.

There seemed to be no one around and Jake knocked hard upon the door. Then he ran around to the back and knocked on the door of the back room. After awhile he heard someone coming and the door opened.

"I ain't open yet," the old man said, pulling up his trousers and peering crossly down at Jake.

He was a wizened little old man with white hair and very dry, wrinkled skin. He did not look like a happy man to Jake. But Jake, gasping, told his story.

"You say you and your ma was kidnapped and the car is just down the dugway?"

"And they have guns, and the police are after us but we can't tell the police because then the man—the one named Al, will choke me with a towel," Jake finished.

"Hmmm." The old fellow studied Jake's face in half disbelief. "Why don't your daddy come and get you?"

"Because the men said they'd shoot both me and Mama if any policemen asked questions. So Daddy can't tell the policemen. Besides, all Daddy had was that other

car and maybe it doesn't run. He doesn't have any money because the men took his money away."

"Hmmn!"

"Mama wants me to ask you to call the police and send someone after her because maybe they'll shoot her because I ran away . . ."

The old man stepped out the door and stood looking up and down the highway. Then, muttering, he tramped around to the front of the station.

His eyes swept the highway, north and south. "Don't seem to be a car in sight . . ."

"It's way down. They drove it off past a little hill so you can't see it even from the road."

"Hmmph!"

"Can't you go down in your car and get my Mommy?"

"Hmmnph!"

"They are awful mean to my Mommy! Haven't you got a car?"

"Yes, but it won't run—I'm all alone here—can't be leavin' my business to run off on no fool chase, sonny!"

"Well then, can't you call up the policemen?"

"No phones out here, sonny!"

And now Jake broke. His underlip shot out and tears ran down his face. His weariness and his fears broke through. "Maybe they will shoot my mommy!" he sobbed.

"Now sonny, you stop that baby stuff! Guess we can do something about it." He was thinking—muttering to himself. "Tell you what, very next car comes through here we'll flag 'em down. We'll tell them to get the police at Quartzsite—or if they're headed south, we'll have 'em phone from the Army post about thirty miles south. Somebody will be coming through pretty quick. You sit right here and I'll go out to the highway and stop somebody."

Jake sat down on a five-gallon oil can and held his face in his hands. This old man didn't really believe him about the trouble but he had promised to send for help—to stop a car. Jake could do no more.

Suddenly, the old man shouted to Jake. "Look son, a car's coming now!"

Jake looked to the south where the old man pointed. He looked and looked, a horror clutching at his stomach and stopping his breath like the towel had done the night before in Al's hands.

The car coming was the blue Mercury station wagon. Nick was driving, his mother and Al were in the back. The old man waved his arms wildly and the car slowed, turning in.

Jake sat like a lump of rock watching. He saw Nick's arm shoot out the window and heard the rack of the automatic—one shot—then two more.

He saw the old man fold and fall to the roadside, the blood shooting from his neck.

While Jake watched Nick leaped out of the car and grabbed the old

man by the collar of his shirt and began to drag him toward the station. Nick barely glanced at Jake who sat cowered like a ball of yarn against the side of the service station. He kept dragging the body, fast, around to the back of the building.

Then he came running around to the front again. He still did not look at Jake. He ran to the place where the old man had stood and kicked dust over the blood spot and along the way where the body had made marks.

Then he jumped back into the station wagon and drove it around to the back. Soon Jake heard him tell Al to get busy and change license plates on those cars.

At last Nick came around to the front and looked down at Jake. His mother was with Nick and Nick had the gun in her side again.

Nick didn't look mad. He was sort of smiling. He said to Jake, "Your ma was worried about you, kid. Why did you run off?"

Jake looked at his mother's face. Her lips quivered and she did not smile.

Jake said, "I got tired of *him*!" He pointed down to the place where Al was.

"You mean Al—you got tired of Al?"

Jake nodded, his lips pressed tightly. In this situation he felt he would do better not to speak any more than absolutely necessary.

"Well, we'll watch Al after this. No need for you to have trouble because of him!"

Nick sat down on the ledge of stone and motioned Helen to sit. He said, conversationally, "Now let's all get things straight. We don't want any more trouble. Just as soon as we get that license plate changed and the other things tended to—such as some breakfast and gas in the car—we'll go on to Mexico. But until then, Jake will just sit in the back of the station and we'll tie his feet and his hands so he can't be running off again."

Nick took out a dirty white handkerchief and tied Jake's hands. Then he led the two of them around to the back and found a piece of rope and tied Jake's feet.

He said to Helen, "Go inside and make us some coffee."

Helen obeyed him, wordlessly. Jake sat miserably in the shade against the building. Al was pounding around behind the sheds in back.

In a few minutes he came over. He stooped down to Jake, slapped him hard across the face. "You little brat! I ought to clobber you across this cement here!"

Nick said, "All right, Al! Leave him be! He's just a little kid and you don't need to scare him anymore than he already is!"

Al turned to Nick. "You gettin' soft on me?"

Nick sighed and pulled out a cigarette. "Not on you, I ain't! And you'd better remember that."

Al pulled out his gun from his pocket, levelling it at Nick. "I guess I don't need you around anymore! I'm sick of your bossin' anyway."

Nick yawned. "Put it back, Al. We'll eat and feel better. No need you gettin' huffy!"

"Yeah! You talk! You had the woman all night and won't let me get even a touch! You're hoggin' the whole show and I'm sick of it!"

Nick walked over to the door and looked in. "Hurry up with that coffee!" he shouted to Helen. Then to Al, "Look, Al! You can have her—all you want. Only take the right time for it, will you?"

Al dropped the gun into his pocket. "When's the right time accordin' to you?"

"First, we better look around here and see if we're alone. Then we'd better make plans in case somebody comes—Get rid of the old man's body. You'll get your moment after that if the coast is clear."

"You mean that? Can I have all I want with her?"

Nick nodded, turning his head away in distaste. Then he picked up Jake and carried him around behind the sheds. He dropped him down and he and Al began to dig with a couple of old shovels they found. After they had put the old man's body under the dirt they rolled two empty and rusted oil drums over the spot.

Helen had cooked coffee and eggs in the old man's back room.

"You watch the road while I eat, then I'll spell you!" Nick told Al.

Al glowered but obeyed.

Helen spooned some food into Jake's mouth. He could barely swallow, but he forced himself. Helen did not eat though she sipped her coffee.

Al came hurrying. "Hey, Nick! There's a car coming. What'll I do if they stop?"

Nick rose. "Stay here and watch these two. If either of them makes a sound let them have it. Take that big wrench there and drop it on their heads hard!"

Al grinned and picked up the wrench and stood with it over Jake's head, leering at Helen. She knew that it would be Jake—and not herself—who would take Al's blow if there was to be one!

In a little while Nick returned. "You go out again, Al. That car didn't get here. Turned off the highway up there aways and drove off into the toolies! Just some local guy in an old beat-up pick-up. But he may wander down here—may know the old man. If he comes we'll say the old man went to Quartzsite for something. That we're relatives of his just keeping watch for him until he gets back. If anybody acts suspicious let 'em have it quick!"

Joy Ridel sat sulkily in the small lunch room toying with a cup of cocoa. She was miserable with defeat and frustration. For once in

her life she thought she had found her big moment—something to make her hit the headlines—and it had fallen flat. First the gunman turned out to be not the kidnaper she'd hoped, but a victim himself, and then he'd gone soft on her; given her money to board a bus back to Needles, with neither danger nor glory at her heels.

Joy vowed not to return to Needles. Instead she would go on—and on and on! Let them chase her. Let the police look for her! Her name would be in the papers.

She looked around at the customers for a moment and chose a truck driver. He was a short, balding fellow, tired looking. Joy sidled over to him and said, "Which way are you going?"

He stared at her. "Does it matter?"

"I need to get home," she lied. "I ran out of money and just wondered which way you were going—if I could ride with you."

"I'm going to Yuma," he answered. "Where do you live?"

She smiled at him in simulated astonishment. "Yuma? That's where I live. Gee, could I ride with you?"

He studied her. "Well, I don't know. I wouldn't want to get in any trouble."

"Please," Joy begged. "There wouldn't be any trouble. I'd surely appreciate it . . ."

He sighed. "Okay, I guess. My truck is a two-ton hay truck and it's pretty uncomfortable when it's empty. But you can come along, I guess."

Joy looked out and saw a red and white Ford sedan coming across the intersection. The car crossed the road and wheeled in to the station. Joy turned to the truck driver and said, "I'll just run into the rest room. You won't go for a minute will you?"

"I'll wait," he told her and ordered another cup of coffee.

The red and white Ford gassed up and left, heading south. Joy finally came out from the rest room. She smiled at the truck driver and said she was ready. She had put a big blob of brilliant lipstick on her sulky mouth.

Mike saw the service station in the desert early sunshine, looming far off to the south and left, the outcropping of Kofa mountains rising beyond. Through here the road dips were murderous in the old pickup and he had to slow considerably.

The sun glinting on something—the rear bumper of a new blue station wagon, the main part of which was behind a shed—caught Mike's eyes. He couldn't be certain about the car. Neither could he afford to be wrong!

There was an old trail of a road which led off to the left into the hills from one of the dips. Mike turned on this road and drove the pickup far enough back to be out

of sight. Then he got out and started walking, the .22 pistol tucked into his shirt.

He walked a long distance, keeping far east of the highway and out of sight as best he could. He went down through the broken country and cut back onto the highway. He crossed the highway far to the west and approached the service station from behind.

It took about an hour. During that time an occasional car passed on the highway, none of them stopping at the small station.

There was almost no place to hide. Yet Mike made it to the inside of the back shed. He crouched down behind an old ice box. He knew for sure that the blue Mercury station wagon was his own, although the license plates had been changed. He saw the old car closer to the station and saw that it was without plates now. The Arizona plate on his own car must have come from this one.

Inside the back of the station, where Helen sat beside Jake, who was still tight in his bonds, there was a small radio. Al and Nick had turned it on and were listening for the news.

Two gunmen who robbed five stores last evening are still reported on the loose. The body of the murdered man, Mr. Charles Gannett, was retrieved earlier and also the getaway car. Police assume that the two bandits commandeered another car and may have hostages. Because of the possibility of harm to the hostages the police are proceeding with great caution. . . .

Nick switched off the radio and began pacing the floor. "They got that body already!" he complained.

"You said it wouldn't be till the bones were dry . . . You said they'd never find it!" Al jeered.

Nick sat down and began to think. "Why do you suppose nobody stopped us last night?" he pondered. "They found that other car and didn't tumble when we run the road block."

"Because her husband didn't tell, that's why! Like you told him, he'd better not!" Al put in.

Nick nodded. "Just the same I woudn't try no road block now—not in that blue Merc we've got."

"We need another car!" Al said.

"How about the old man's car? The one you took the plate from?"

"We could try."

"It won't run!" Jake piped up suddenly.

Nick turned to him. "How do you know, sonny?"

Jake looked at his mother, as if he regretted having spoken. Nick prompted him. "Huh? How do you know that?"

Jake sighed. "'Cause he told me it wouldn't," he admitted.

It was nine A.M. Al said, "It's starting to heat up. We'd better hit the road in something."

"No," Nick said. "Unless we can get another car we're better off here for now. That Army station is only

about thirty miles south of here. We got to figure some way of getting through the road blocks. They'll be after that Mercury anytime. You can bet her husband will have reported it by now . . ." He paused. "You know, wonder why he never took that car we left him?"

Al shook his head. "Wanted to hitch a ride, I guess. "It sure is going to be hot around here."

"Well, this place has a cooler," Nick told him. "Turn it on."

"Where?"

"Over there by that window. Try that!" Al went over and turned a switch and hot hair filled the room with a steady whir.

"Cooler? That's hot!" complained Al.

"You have to turn the water on some place. Water drips down through all that stuff outside and the wind blows through the wet stuff. That's what makes it cool."

Al started outside walking around, looking for the water inlet to the cooler.

Mike held his breath listening. He could see through a crack in the shed. He saw the stooped figure of Al walking around. His heart gave a lurch and pounded. Sweat formed in droplets on his forehead.

Mike took out the gun and held it in his hand. *That's one of them, all right*!

He wished he could shoot the fellow now. But something in him held back. Some voice talked into his fevered brain. You don't know how many there are inside. You don't know where Jake and Helen are. One shot might be the finish for Jake and Helen if they are, please God, still alive. So he held the gun and his breath.

Al found the water spigot with the copper tubing inlet to the cooler. He turned on the water then went back into the garage.

A red and white Ford was coming from the North. Mike saw it slow and turn in. He saw the man inside and the rifle on the seat when the man got out and approached the station. He recognized Warren Ridel.

In a moment Nick came out from the small back door and walked around in front. Mike had seen that it was Nick and now he must only discover whether Helen and Jake were alive before he made his plans. He strained to listen and watch.

Warren Ridel was talking to Nick.

"Say, can you tell me what happened to the guy in that black pickup back there off the highway?"

Nick looked where Ridel pointed. "I don't see no pickup."

"Well, it's just around a piece of that hill. You can see it from back on the road a ways. I think that's my pickup but I can't drive this car over that road. Thought I'd park it here and hike over."

There was a dead silence. Then Nick, smoothly, "Why sure thing! We'll watch it for you."

Ridel went over and removed the rifle from the front seat. "Don't mind telling you that I'd better not meet the fellow who stole my car and run off with my girl . . ."

"Run off with your girl? Nick wasn't curious but he wished to be very casual and normal in this circumstance.

Ridel looked at Nick steadily. "Never mind no questions. But if anybody shows up here—a man and a young girl fourteen years old, you just keep him here. But watch him! He's a bad one!" He started off. "May not be my pickup but I found out they was headed this way. Tracked 'em all the way. By the way I left the keys in case you need to move my car!"

Nick waited while Ridel walked back up the highway, and then cut off through the desert to the east, to intercept the old road that way. Then Nick went around to the back and slammed the door after himself.

Almost at once the door reopened and Helen came out followed by Al carrying Jake. Mike could see them clearly. He saw the torn blouse Helen wore and the way Jake's hands and feet were bound. The last man had an armload of groceries, cans, packages, coffee. Helen carried a water can.

They are all right! They are alive and all right! Thank God!

Then he heard the new Ford start and take off. Heading south.

He ran around to the blue Mercury station wagon. No time to change that license plate, now. The keys were missing. Mike searched around among a pile of tools. He found a screwdriver and plyers. He got busy over the ignition switch, removed the plate. He quickly rigged a jumper on the switch and got in.

The car backed out smoothly and swiftly. He was on the road, following the red and white Ford.

Mustn't get too close! They mustn't recognize the car or the driver. But they were going like the mill tails out of Hell!

The red and white Ford appeared, and disappeared, out of the dips and around the curves. Mike kept it just ahead of him, pacing it at 70 miles an hour. A great sense of relief was in him now and he felt free and strong at last.

Helen and Jake were all right!

He had been right not to report it to the police. At least this way they were still safe.

But for how long?

Surely Warren Ridel would report the theft of his new car. Then a thought struck Mike. Ridel would assume that it was he—Mike—who had stolen that car, wouldn't he? He already suspected the pickup as his own. When he found the pickup and returned to the station and found his new Ford gone—what would Ridel do?

He would suppose that Mike had taken the car.

Ridel would surely follow in the pickup! That would be his logical move.

But how long before the police got in it? And how safe were Helen and Jake even if the police didn't stop that red and white car?

Once more Mike began to wish he had notified the police, asked for help. There were arguments both ways. Still, somehow he had gone this far and his family was still safe! So far so good! But he resolved to stop the next patrol car he met and get help. It was not going to be easy any way you looked at it.

Mike, keeping the car ahead in view but as far ahead as possible, saw the car slow and turn right. There was a dust cloud forming after it as it sped westward, disappearing through a gully formation.

Mike drove on to the place the Ford had turned. There was a small sign indicating west to the Colorado river . . . the road was a poor one but negotiable. Mike looked behind. He could not see any other car. The pickup would possibly never catch up.

Yet he might need Ridel!

He stopped the station wagon and got out. He opened the hood of the engine and shoved his hand down inside, getting a blob of black grease. Under the road sign indicating Colorado river he scrawled in big letters . . . J. RIDEL and made an arrow pointing.

Ridel would assume that Joy had made the sign and follow.

Mike hoped.

It was ten A.M. The red and white Ford, followed at a distance, by the blue station wagon, had hit river country. Nick got out followed by Helen. Al got out, leaving Jake trussed in back.

"Now what?" demanded Al.

"We sit tight!"

"But I thought the whole idea in taking this car was to get through to the border."

Nick shook his head. "You forget that this car will be hot before we could get through . . . I should have killed that guy and then we'd be all right."

"And you're supposed to be the brain!" Al spoke disgustedly.

Nick shook his head. "They won't be looking for us in the red and white Ford. They'll be looking for us in that blue station wagon. We'll make like fishermen until night anyway. Then we can try getting through. Maybe we can switch license plates somewhere."

Al was looking at Helen. "This is as good a time as any for me," he declared, leering at her.

Nick said, "You better wait until we scout around a little. Be sure we are private here!"

"All right but hurry up about it!" Al said, sitting down in the shade, dipping his fingers into the dark water of the river.

Helen lifted Jake out of the car

and sat him down. She unlaced his shoes below the rope bindings.

"Hey, what are you trying?" Al demanded.

"Just let him have his feet in the water," she explained, forcing a sort of smile.

The welts where the rope had cut were cruel and red. Helen rubbed Jake's ankles tenderly.

"Leave it be!" commanded Al.

Nick returned. "Aw, take the ropes off the kid!" he said, seeing the welts. "He won't run no place while we're watching him. You won't try nothing, will you, sonny?"

Jake shook his head and Helen removed the rope bindings.

Jake, free again, smiled at Helen. He pulled up his pant legs and waded into the cool water.

"Everything okay?" Al asked of Nick.

Nick nodded. "Nobody around. There's a sort of shack back there a ways. Nobody there. No boats, no tracks. You can't see the car from any direction. We can go up to that shack and stay until night."

They trudged up through the thick sand and growth, coming upon the shack. It was barely standing, the boards rotting. It had evidently been a boat shelter at one time but long deserted. Still it was shade and protection from prying eyes.

Helen thought, this will be our grave. Here out of sight, and we'll be sunk down in that blackish water with weights on us!

Until they had taken the road leading to the river area she had had hope. Now all hope had gone from her. They must be thirty or more miles from help of any kind. It was still too hot for hunters and too many mosquitos for fishermen or any others.

The sound of mosquito slapping was the only sound for some time. Yet she knew that Al was looking at her—she could feel his eyes boring in from behind her.

How long now before Nick gave the word for which Al had been waiting? Then, after that, Helen knew they would kill her and Jake —they would have no further use for either of them as hostages.

Joy was rambling on, and the truck driver who had obligingly agreed to take her to Yuma was regretting his bargain. Joy told him many things and perhaps they had gone twenty miles before he started at the last of her remarks.

"Did you say you knew where those hold-up men were?" he asked.

She had been bragging, he realized, but this last remark was really something.

Joy gave him one of her cunning looks, the left eye wandering, the pouty lips parted. She was nodding slowly and with emphasis.

"Well, if you know that why don't you tell the cops? They'd sure like to know!" he told her.

"Because!"

"Oh, just because, huh? Now don't give me that bull."

"All right!" she almost sang it. "Then how do you like this—I know the gun was taken from the getaway car. I know who's got that gun. I know who has it and that he's after those hold up men and the reason he didn't call the cops is because those hold-up men have his wife and little boy and they'll shoot them the very instant a cop asks questions. That's why he don't call the cops and they're ahead of us just a little ways on this very road."

"Wow!" commented the truck driver, shaking his head at Jay. Still, it did sound kind of peculiar.

"I was with that man until you came and picked me up!" Joy announced, unable now to keep any of her story back.

"You were with him?" The incredulous statement—with the undertone of half belief broke Joy down completely. She told the whole story from beginning to end.

"What's more," she finished. "I saw my very own daddy go down this road in our new Ford. He's after the pickup. He doesn't know I'm not still in it."

The driver of the truck began to moan. "Oh why did I ever fall for that story of yours! I feel like putting you out right here and now!"

They rode in silence for sometime, Joy with a smug little smile on her lips. She knew she had his respect. He would not put her out and he would be very careful how he treated her from now on.

It was nearly noon. Joy, watching the road saw the sign indicating the way to the river. She saw the smudge of grease and her mouth fell open.

"Well, I like that!" she exclaimed.

"Now what?"

"Didn't you see that sign?"

"Just a sign pointing down to the river for fisherman?"

"No it isn't! Underneath it has my name written and an arrow pointing plain as day!"

"Now don't give me that!"

"It does! It says J. RIDEL and points with an arrow!"

He shook his head. "You're nuts. Absolutely!"

Mike saw the way the red and white Ford went. It had turned southward, plowing through the loose dirt. He turned his own car up the other fork and drove for some distance. There was an opening ahead and signs of a recent trailer encampment. He could drive no further, the new car was low and heavy and before he knew it he was in a sand trap. He could go neither forward nor backward.

He got out and started to walk southward, down river, leaving the blue station wagon. In his trousers the .22 pistol bulged. He held one hand to steady it.

They had all sat down in the shack. Helen on the floor near Jake, Al holding a gun on his lap and leaning against the back of the shed, his head resting so that he could watch Helen without having to move.

Nick stood by the door, looking out over the water, listening, swatting mosquitoes.

"Well, Nick—?" Al began.

Nick did not answer. Al sat upright. "How about it, Nick? When is the time for me with *her!?"* his head jerked in Helen's direction, his eyes not leaving her for an instant.

Al heaved a big sigh and spat outside. "You dirty hog!" he muttered under his breath.

"What? What did you say?" Nick demanded. He wheeled on Al, his mouth curled in distaste. He said, "All right! Now, then! I'll take the kid and we'll go for a walk . . ."

Helen swallowed and looked at Nick. He avoided her gaze. She felt sick and afraid, but no desire to fight was left.

She saw Nick lead Jake away and knew he was going to finish the child off this time. Perhaps from behind, painlessly. At least she could trust Nick for that. He would not hurt the child if he could help it. Just a quick movement, probably on the back of the head. A sudden blow and the deep water.

Nick paused with Jake a step or two from the shack and looked back at Al, who was standing now, putting his gun up on a jutting rafter of the shack.

"Don't use that gun!" he ordered. "This is government property . . . Somebody might hear."

"I'd better choke her then?"

Nick did not answer. He had turned his back and was walking down the river with Jake.

Helen fought like a tiger. She lifted her knee and let him have it in the groin with all her strength. He had completely ripped off her blouse. Her lips bled, but she hit him hard.

He drew back for a moment cursing. It gave her another breath and she stood up and screamed.

Nick came running back.

"For God's sake! Can't you shut her up?" he panted to Al.

He raised his hand and struck Helen a sharp blow, knocking her to her knees.

Al was cursing and rocked back and forth on his heels, double over, in pain and fury.

"Get up!" Nick commanded him.

Al stood, still half-buckled with pain.

"Leave her alone!" Nick commanded. "Don't touch her! You're too goddam dumb to handle her!"

Al stood dumbly staring at Nick, but the pain was leaving him and anger was taking its place.

"What did you say?" He demanded.

Jake now stood in the doorway, horror on his face at seeing his mother, blood running from her mouth, her hair dishevelled, her clothes half torn off.

Helen looked at him unbelievingly. She had thought Nick would have done with Jake by now—so quickly, as was Nick's way.

Nick was looking at Jake. "I said, leave them both alone! We're not going to hurt them. You hear! Not either one! You don't touch the woman again!" He turned away, putting one hand gently on Jake's head.

Al stood dumbly for a moment.

Helen screamed, "Look out, Nick!"

But he wheeled too late! The gun in Al's hands spat out.

Nick crumpled to the floor. A small trickle of blood ran from the hole in his chest.

Helen reached for Nick, raising his head, holding her hand over the wound in his chest.

The sweat glistened on Nick's pale brow and the near transparency of his skin was deathly. He gasped in short labored gasps. Al stood holding the smoking gun, his lips curled, his small eyes crafty.

Helen said, "Oh Nick! I'm sorry, really I am." She began to cry a bit, strangled, little sobs not real and only momentary.

Jake stared in complete terror.

Nick looked at Jake. "Run, sonny!" he commanded. "Run like hell!"

Then he gasped a few more times and was still. He was dead.

Al said, "See what you done?"

Helen stood up and reached for her blouse.

"No you don't!" said Al. "I'm going to fix it this time."

Helen saw Jake backing toward the door. She saw the gun.

But Jake was running!

It was not hopeless for Jake. It must not be hopeless for Helen. But she could not stand off his gun. So she stood quietly while he advanced.

He took her torn blouse and made a rope with it, tearing it in long strips. He tied Helen's hands behind her. The boards in the rear of the shack were rotted between. He pushed the ends of the blouse through and fastened them securely around a solid board.

Then, grinning at her lewdly, he ripped off her nylons, throwing her sandals out into the water, over Nick's dead body.

Then he tied her ankles, securing them to the board shack also. She drooped, half hung as on a cross, before him. But her child had run and was still running. Jake would get away. He would not die! He would not see what happened here to his mother.

Jake scrambled through the bushes, running. He ran up river, away and away. Nick was dead—he had seen Nick die. Nick had wanted Jake to run! That was funny because he had been the one to tie Jake up for running away before. Nick had made Jake promise not to run that time and Jake had promised so that he would not have to wear the ropes any longer.

He and Nick had been walking and Nick had told Jake that when he was a boy he always wanted to

go by a river—a real river—and see fish. He pointed out the fish, jumping for bugs now to Jake.

Then they had sat down, he and Nick, and Nick had patted Jake on the head. He had told Jake that he was a real brave kid!

Then they had heard his mother screaming and Jake had insisted on going back. But—Al had killed Nick, and now his mother was alone with Al.

Surely there must be somebody Jake could find for help.

Then—like a dream or something—he saw his father coming.

Mike picked up his son, lifting him to him. "Where's Mommy, Jake?" he demanded at once.

Jake tried to tell him everything. Jake was panting and there was so much to tell. "She's back in that little house by the river. Hurry, Daddy! Al has her and he killed Nick and he's very angry with Mommy! He might shoot her if you don't hurry!"

Mike put Jake down. "The car is back there quite aways. Keep going up the river and you'll see it. Get inside and lay down and stay there!" Mike ordered. "If you see anybody send them for help!"

Then he hurried down the river while Jake went back the way his father had pointed, looking for the blue station wagon.

Now Daddy had come and it would be all right!

He found the station wagon, crawled in the back and lay down. He went instantly to sleep, the perspiration from the heat forming small beads on his naked arms and chest.

After walking through the desert to the place where the old black pickup was parked Warren Ridel was pretty tired. However, his anger sustained him upon seeing—as he well knew he would—that the pickup was his own. Also, the keys were in place and the tank nearly full. Simple to get in and drive it back to that station.

Warren felt certain that the man who had taken the pickup and Joy were somewhere around that station. They had to be! There was no place else to hide. That fellow who had been at the station looked kind of funny, come to think of it. Maybe he was hiding something. Maybe Joy and the roughneck who kidnapped her had been around.

Warren drove back to the station. His red and white Ford was not in sight. He jumped out of the pickup, his rifle in his hand and went up to the front of the station. The closed sign was still in place and the door locked. Warren walked around to the back—no sign of the red and white Ford. He recalled having seen a blue station wagon at the back. It was gone, too.

Warren went to the back door and pounded. He waited, then he opened the door and went in.

He saw the dirty dishes and signs of recent occupancy . . . cigarette butts. The air-cooler was going full

blast. The cupboards were open and all signs of a recent ransacking existed.

Then he went out and noted from the tracks the direction his red and white Ford had been driven. Then he got back into the pickup and followed, heading south.

It was nearly noon when the hay truck bearing Joy Ridel and its driver reached the intersection just outside Yuma. There was a road block and Joy was astonished to see the black pickup containing her father waiting off to the side.

He had been obliged to wait as he had no driver's license. The night before he had run through two road blocks without having to show the license, but merely satisfy the patrolmen as to his identity and the fact that he was alone in his vehicle. However, now the officers were getting fussy and when they found he was without his license they had required him to wait off to the side.

Joy said to the driver as soon as she spotted her father, "Hey, there's my daddy! What's he doing in the pickup?"

Then she threw open the door on her side and got out, running over to her father.

The driver of the hay truck said to the patrolman, "You'd better talk with that girl. There's something mighty funny about her. She told me a story back at Quartzsite about living in Yuma and then she told me another story. You'd better have her tell it to you."

The officer nodded and let the hay truck through.

Warren Ridel, pleased of course to see Joy unharmed, was nonetheless adamant on going after the outlaws, as he termed them. He had barely begun to listen to Joy's story when the patrolman came over.

In a few moments, the patrolman stepped back and called Wade Bingham, the county sheriff.

"Hey Wade! Come over and hear this!" he called.

The sheriff, a tired looking man with a big mustache and sad brown eyes, came over. Joy's father prodded her. "Go on, Joy! We'd better tell them everything."

"Well," began Joy, popping her lips and letting her eyes wander over their faces—noting the look of intent interest there, feeling the marvelous sense of importance she'd been longing to feel. "Well, it's like this. Mike Bruce—that's the name of the fellow who kidnaped me last night . . ."

"Wait a minute," the sheriff cut in. "You were kidnaped? When and where exactly?" The patrolman had taken out a pad and pencil.

Joy relished this. She popped her lips again. "Just above Searchlight. Daddy and I were on our way to Vegas and this Mike Bruce was in the road. He flagged us down."

Warren Ridel cut in. "He had

a flashlight and a gun. He was standing by a car with its dimmers on off the road. He made me get out of the pickup—traded billfolds with me, got in my car and drove south with Joy."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Well," began Joy again, popping her lips. "He said he'd kill me the very minute a cop stopped to ask questions. Daddy knew he meant it, too."

"I felt I couldn't take a chance on that fellow killing my little girl if a policeman stopped him for questions. So I hitchhiked back to my place and started after him in my new Ford."

"Wait a minute. You came south in another car?"

"That's right. A new red and white Ford."

"License number LA7-0762, California," Joy said.

The patrolman made a note of it. The sheriff called to the third officer who was taking care of traffic off to the side. "Bill, did any red and white new Ford go through here?"

The officer shook his head. "Not in the last hour anyway."

"Go on!" the sheriff said to Joy.

"Well, it turned out that Mike Bruce wasn't an outlaw at all—" she said, drawling it out, looking at their faces.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it turned out that the reason he had held up daddy and kidnaped me was to get our pickup and run after the real outlaws!"

She stopped to savor the effect of this. Finding it satisfactory she went on. "The real outlaws are those two bandits who did all those robberies yesterday and who murdered that store owner."

"Go on!" prompted the sheriff. His tired brown eyes had gained a light, his shoulders straightened.

"Well, the very same thing had happened to him as happened to Daddy and me," Joy said. "He'd been fixing a flat tire and along came this getaway car and the two outlaws. They held a gun on Mike and forced his wife and little boy to go off with them in their car."

She stopped and looked from face to face.

"Yes, yes!" prompted the patrolman. "Go on!"

"Well, the reason Mike had to holdup Daddy and kidnap me was so he could chase the outlaws and catch them himself. Because *they* were using *his* wife and little boy for *their* hostages. They told Mike they'd kill his wife and little boy if Mike reported it to the police. It was such a good trick that Mike decided to use it himself."

She paused. Warren Ridel looked very irked. He said, "Too bad I didn't catch up to him! Taking my car and running over two state lines with my daughter."

"That isn't all, Daddy," said Joy, virtuously. "He used your money, too. He cashed your pay check!"

"What? How did he do it?"

Now Joy looked very cunning indeed. "I helped him!" she stated. "He needed the money so he could catch those outlaws before they had a chance to hurt his wife and little boy!"

"Now let's go over this," the sheriff interrupted. "A man named Mike Bruce was held up by the two bandits who robbed those stores and murdered that Gannett fellow. He came south chasing those bandits who were in his car with his wife and child. Can you tell us what kind of a car that is?"

Joy nodded. "Sure! He asked at every place if that car had gone through. Otherwise we wouldn't have known which road to take." She sighed. "We lost the trail at Parker, though. They had changed shifts at the checking station. So we stayed in Parker all night. Well, a few hours of the night, that is. Then we cashed Daddy's pay check . . ."

"Oh good!" cut in Ridel sarcastically.

"Well, it was my idea! Joy said, pausing for effect again.

"What was your idea?"

"Cashing that check and taking the road down through Quartzsite. I figured that if these outlaws were going to Mexico that's the road they would take."

"Wait," the sheriff said. "You haven't told us what kind of a car they were in yet."

"It was a blue Mercury station wagon," she answered.

The sheriff looked at the patrolman and then called to Bill again. "Any blue Mercury station wagons go through?"

Bill checked his notes, thought a minute. "A two-tone blue came through, I believe. It was a Yuma Test Station car, though . . ."

"Well, go on!" the sheriff prompted Joy again.

She simpered a bit and then turned her face away. "He put me off at Quartzsite," she said. "Gave me twenty dollars to go home on the bus."

"Well, why didn't you?" demanded the sheriff and her father together.

She sighed. "Because I wanted to come down and see if those outlaws had really come this way. I wanted to help catch them."

She turned to her father. "Where was the truck when you found it? Wasn't Mike anywhere around?"

Ridel turned to the sheriff. "This pickup was way out in the desert off to the east of the highway. Just north of that service station way back there . . ."

"Oh, yes!" nodded the sheriff. "Old Slats' place!"

"I drove to that service station and the fellow said he hadn't seen anybody. But he lied, damn his hide!"

"Lied?"

"Yes! Because when I came back there wasn't a soul there. They'd run off in my new Ford. Came this way, too. I tracked the car here."

"Old Slats had run off in your car?"

"Don't know who he was. Didn't look very old to me."

"Can you describe him?"

"Well, not too big of a fellow. Dark-skinned. Said nobody had been around."

The sheriff turned to the patrolman. "That doesn't sound like old Slats, does it."

"Sure don't! You say no one else was around, yet he drove off in your new car, coming south?"

Ridel nodded. "Say—just thought of something!"

"What?"

"That car in back that was missing when I got back. It was a blue station wagon!"

The sheriff stepped back and conferred a moment with the patrolman. "Send that message out on the short wave!" he finished.

To Ridel and Joy. "Looks like they're the men were after—at least one of them answers the description. Nick Frehnor, ex-con, wanted for robbery and murder. The other fellow was probably around there and maybe this Bruce's wife and kid were still with them. At least now we have something to go on."

The radio in the police car was blaring. The sheriff went over and listened in. Then he came back to Joy and Warren. He said, "The police were called in by your brother, Cash Ridel at Needles. A patrol car is in Quartzsite now. I told them to come south and we'd go north. We'll set up a road block both ways and one on the California side of the dam out at Yuma Test station. They might have made it through that way already, though. We'd better call Winterhaven and send out patrols along Highway 80."

"They could be in Mexico by now if they took that road across the dam," said the patrolman.

"They could!" the sheriff admitted. "Better call the Border patrol and give a description of those two cars. If that fellow Bruce is on their tail, though, we can at least count on finding them soon."

"What should I do now?" Joy asked the sheriff.

"You're going home!" her father answered gruffly.

The sheriff nodded. "You've been very helpful," he told her. And to Warren. "When we catch that fellow Bruce we'll hold him to answer to your complaint. I get tired of these guys taking the law into their own hands."

"I just want to meet up with that guy! That's all! I'd like to lay one right on his jaw!"

"Now, Daddy!" Joy chided. "He can't be blamed too much, you know."

The sheriff said, "You'd better tell us how you get to your ranch out of Needles." He smiled at Joy. "There'll be newspaper men wanting to talk to Joy—take her picture for the papers and all."

Joy put her head down and

raised it again. Her eyes were not in the least crossed. She smiled very prettily at the sheriff.

The sheriff then scribbled something on a note paper and gave it to Ridel. "This will get you through the next road block going north. It explains that I will be responsible for your driver's license . . ."

"Thanks," said Ridel and started up the pickup, turning it back toward Quartzsite.

They had progressed north about twenty miles when Joy suddenly exclaimed, "Daddy! I forgot to tell them something very important."

"What?"

"That sign up here aways. It's a sign pointing an old road to the Colorado River."

"So what of it?"

"Didn't you see when you came down? It had 'J. Ridel' on it at the bottom in big plain writing, and an arrow pointing."

"Why would it have that on it?"

"Don't you see, Daddy? Mike must have written it there. He must have known I'd be following and made that arrow to say which way he'd gone!"

Ridel shook his head. "Beats me!" he muttered. But he turned the pickup around and started back.

"We'll hail the first patrol car coming this way," he said.

"Daddy," Joy said. "Mike said he'd pay you back—all the money and for the use of the pickup and all."

Warren Ridel nodded. "Well, who am I to complain at him? I had my rifle along ready to shoot and I didn't notify the police either. Guess we're in the same boat, him and me!"

It seemed that now if she could die, it would be the perfect thing at the perfect time. The strain on Helen's arms, the pain in her face from the blows she had suffered, the pain in her legs from straining, the backache, all these things were as nothing compared to the fact that Jake had gotten away.

Now that he had her trussed lightly, Al stood back looking at her, letting his eyes savor her weakness, her bruises, her near nakedness. He was breathing fast. He reached out a hand, a blunt thumb and pressed it into Helen's stomach slowly and with increasing pressure. Pressed and pressed until he could almost feel her backbone—until he saw her wince with the pain of it!

When he released the pressure Helen drew an involuntary breath and raised her head, her face white.

He laughed shortly. Helen's lips moved and she dropped her head again, not wanting to look at the pure sadism on his face—being more sickened from that than the pain.

He rubbed a hand across his mouth and looked at her again. Her body was covered with mosquitos, plump with blood.

Then they both heard the sound, the rock splashing into the water from up river. Al pressed his nose against the big crack in the hut at that side. He looked long and carefully.

Then he swore and turned to Helen. He strode behind her and undid the part of her bindings that fastened her to the wall of the shack. He had his gun in his right hand and held Helen in front of him with his left—held her by the bindings on her wrists from behind.

With no wall to steady her, her knees buckled, the bindings on her ankles cutting in tightly. But he held her up in front of his own crouching figure.

Helen felt the gun cruelly in her back at the same time she saw the figure in the doorway.

"Mike!" she whispered. "Mike!" and fainted, her head dropping on her bare chest, her knees completely buckled.

Al's arm swept around her waist holding her unconscious form tightly against him, ducking down so she was a protection to his body, the gun still in her back.

"Drop your gun!" Al commanded of Mike. "Or I'll let her have it."

Mike let the .22 pistol fall to the floor.

"Kick it over this way!"

Mike kicked it.

Al let himself down slowly to a sitting position, still holding the limp form of Helen against him. He worked forward inching toward the gun Mike had dropped.

When he had it he kicked it behind him. Then he dropped Helen onto the old rotting floor and held his gun toward Mike in the doorway. Too late—Mike had slipped around the door out of sight.

"I know you're out there!" Al growled. "I can kill both of you any time I want."

Mike leaned against the building, raising his arms up and bracing them on the side.

Between Mike and Helen was Nick's dead body. The blood from his wound had dried and a million flies were on it.

"Too bad you had to come!" said Al. "Now you'll have the pleasure of watching it . . ."

Mike stared at the river, his dark eyes enigmatic and deep as wells.

" 'Cause I don't aim to be cheated out of her!" Al said.

"You're going to get to watch it! That might make it even better . . ." he paused. "I've never had an audience to appreciate it before!" He was looking down at Helen. Looking at her and unbuckling his belt with his left hand, still holding the gun on the door with his right.

"You're not that good!" Mike told him. "You can't do it and watch me, too!" He stood tightly against the building, taunting.

A flicker of doubt passed Al's face, his lips working. He tugged at the belt.

Mike sensed the doubt though.

He went on, "It'd take a lot bigger man than you—bigger and better, to do the job! Besides you're too dumb! I'll catch you in a dumb act and then we'll see!"

It was the way everybody had always got the best of Al—the way Nick had controlled him. Telling Al how dumb he was! Threatening him with his dumbness! Calling him names!

"I can kill you any time," Al bragged. He shot one shot through the wood. Mike ducked, fastening himself behind the upright which bore the weight of the shack. Al got up and started after Mike. He stooped and picked up the .22 pistol, shoving it into his belt front, fastening the belt. Then he stepped outside the shack, listening and looking. Mike had disappeared. But he had to be close—among the clumps of tamarick, behind the high bank.

Al leaned against the door of the shack, his gun ready. He waited. Sooner or later he knew Mike would come—come to rescue his wife.

Mike would be listening and watching, too. Al could wait. He had been very patient so far on this deal. He'd have his moment and it would be all the better for the waiting!

The sun had passed the meridian long enough to put the shack entirely in shade. Al stood in the shade waiting. He felt sure that Mike Bruce was watching him.

Al could not guess what Mike would do but he felt certain the man would try to rescue his wife. He felt certain that Mike would not go for help, leaving his wife alone with Al.

Al felt a great exhultation—a cleverness, a knowingness. He listened and waited.

Helen could see Al's back. Her hands and feet hurt in the bindings and her bare skin was a mass of welts from the mosquitos. She wondered where Mike had gone. She could not guess what Al planned. She wondered when Al would grow tired waiting and return to her—to hurting her and killing her!

The patrol car arrived at the desert service station from Quartzsite. The two officers investigated the premises. They found no trace of Old Slats.

They were waiting for the sheriff of Yuma County to come from the south. At two P.M. they made contact and went over the findings. They speculated that either old Slats had been taken as hostage or that he had been murdered. After awhile they discovered the two shovels and the loose dirt. Then they found the recently-placed rusted oil drums. Under the oil drums they found the body.

While they were noting all these things they received another radio call. This one had to do with the sign further south which indicated an access road to the Colorado river.

It made note of the fact that the name J. Ridel and an arrow had been added to the sign.

Mike lay, bellied tightly in the sand, amongst the clump of tamarick. He listened, knowing that the killer in the shack lacked the litheness to walk quietly. He would hear him if he came.

He would hear him if he moved on Helen in the shack.

The boards were loose in the shack and sound traveled in the soft air. So, hearing nothing, Mike knew the killer was waiting—waiting for him to show. He decided he was more patient than the killer. He had seen the man and the man's passion. The killer would not wait long. He wanted Helen—that much Mike had seen. So he resolved to wait until he heard sounds—sounds indicating that the killer had moved. Then he would have his chance!

Al knew Mike would outguess him if he waited. It always happened that way. So bring the man out first! Get him on the run and shoot him. Shoot him in the legs, breaking them. Let him lie within sight. Let him watch the rape and death of the woman! Then kill him!

But he would have to flush the man out. Al began to shuffle and kick the boards in the floor, noisily.

Mike came running — quietly, stealthily. But in plain sight. Al let him get almost to the door.

Then he shot. He was a good marksman and his shot went true. Mike buckled and fell, his right thigh splintered. He tried to crawl along, the pain shooting up into his brain and blinding him. He gasped and felt the wet, warm blood flowing down his leg. It was as if he were in a vise. Nothing could make those muscles move him now. His body screamed and clamored with the pain and refused to let him move!

He heard Al laugh—looked up at the man and saw him laughing, the gun hanging loosely. Al was licking his lips and laughing.

Mike grabbed his leg with both hands, fiercely holding above the warm, bubbling wound. The blood slowed and Mike still grasped. Gritting his teeth and holding his breath he stopped the blood a little.

Why doesn't he finish me off? Mike wondered with a part of his mind that remained somehow untouched by the pain or the emotion. *Because he wants me to suffer,* answered the mind. *He wants to see me suffer. He loves to see suffering and that is a fact and that is his weakness!*

Mike had stopped the blood with his two hands. He raised himself slowly and painfully on his right elbow. It was the left thigh bone that was shattered, the splinters sticking through the gaping wound. The fabric of his gray sports slacks was torn and bloodied.

Slowly, he raised himself and

without looking into the shack at all, merely knowing that Al still watched, savoring his pain, he took his left hand and cleaned away the dirt. He tore open his trouser, panting and gritting his teeth, until the wound was exposed.

All of this, he knew, entranced the man in the shack. He was down below the shack on an incline. Helen, on the floor to the rear, could not see. Not yet! It was well that she could not!

Perhaps it consumed a hundred years of time (more likely ten minutes) for Mike to make a bandage over his wound. He pulled out his handkerchief from his left rear pocket and folded it tightly over the wound, pushing the bone splinters down into the flesh again.

Then, tired beyond all human experience, he fell to the ground in a faint of exhaustion.

He knew the killer stood watching him—knew the killer would not permit him to lie comfortably.

He sensed that Al was moving toward him. He had nothing . . . nothing but his two hands. He breathed and held his breath, willing a great power into those hands.

He lay very quietly, holding his breath, waiting.

Al moved slowly, watching. Mike's face appeared immobile. His eyes were closed. Al came closer.

He stood directly over Mike, looking down. Then he put a foot forward gently, experimentally. He kicked the shattered leg.

Mike did not stir.

Al kicked the leg again, harder.

Still Mike gave no sign!

Then Al, impatient with the possum show, leaned over, grasping Mike by the shoulders to flip him over, face upward.

Mike's two hands, strong with the flow of blood and oxygen and will with which he had been nourishing them, moved.

He had the gun arm. He twisted it with all his strength. The gun dropped and Mike retrieved it.

Mike shot but the shot went wild in the struggle. Still, he held the gun and looked wildly for his target. Al had jumped back and was in the shack again.

Now each man had a gun. Al could not shoot from the rear of the shack. If he came forward he would be the target. He stayed huddled behind Helen, who had now pulled herself erect.

"Stay there!" shouted Al hoarsely. "I've got my gun in her back!"

Helen dropped to the floor and began rolling. Before Al could reach her she was in the doorway. Nick's body was there and it stopped her.

But someone else was there now. Helen saw legs—legs, and above them a black holster.

"Drop your gun and put your hands high!" commanded the new voice, the voice of the patrolman.

So it was all over! Help had finally come.

Only one thing was left as Helen

sat, holding Mike's head in her lap, comforting him. "Put my shirt around you!" he ordered, though the patrolmen were decently looking the other way now.

The one thing that was left was the scream. It was a man's scream and it was not one of pain but of frustration. Complete, anguished frustration!

Al Bertoli had never had, and now would never, never have his moment with the woman! They took him away screaming.

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by Eldon Beerbower

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THE ROOM was comfortably and quietly decorated in expensive colors, restful as a warm melodious symphony. The only incongruous note was the gas-log fireplace. It was too modern for the conservative taste that marked everything else there.

Everything but the Colt .45 in my hand.

The sound in the room was the

WAIT FOR DEATH

I had to kill Johnny Hunter . . . even though I'd never seen him before.

BY

KARL KRAMER

woman's voice saying, "Don't do it, Paul! You know it's wrong. Please don't do it."

The only answer she got was the little metallic clicks I made with the .45 as I inspected it. From the couch I glanced up at her with an annoyed frown. Something had happened to her during these past two weeks. The lips were the same; full and pulpy soft and pink. The eyes under the raven hair were still the rich color of black olives. The breasts still round and hefty. Same

looks, same name, but not the same woman. I never thought I'd see her begging.

I raised the unloaded .45 and drew a cold bead on the face of the heavy bronze clock over the fireplace.

The woman slumped to her knees on the rug beside me and stared up at my face. "Paul," she said, "you don't know the man. you've never seen him. I've never begged in my life, not for anything, but I'm begging you now. Stay away from Johnny Hunter. Please!"

I took my eyes off the gun and looked down at her, feeling something close to pity. This was the only bad part of the deal, hurting her. I went back to the gun. I checked the clip for a full load and slammed it into the butt. I didn't want to talk about it. Not to her. I knew what I had to do and talk wasn't going to help. Not all the

talk in the world.

My eyes searched through the windows across the room. Dusk had thickened to darkness over the city. I glanced at the clock over the gas-logs. Quarter-to-seven and time to leave. I shoved the nose of the .45 deep under my belt at the front and started to get up.

She clutched my coat sleeve, held me there. "Listen to me, Paul. You like me, I can tell. We could get along all right together if we left right now, this minute. Just the two of us."

Desperate fingers tightened about my wrist.

"Hunter means that much to you, Judith?" Those were my first words to her since she had entered the room and found me there with the gun. Her eyelids fell and she lowered her head in a silent confession. I didn't need any other answer.

"I've heard about things like that," I said. "A woman giving up the man she wants in order to save him. Never believed in it. It won't work. I'm sorry you're so stuck on him, but I owe this to Vance."

"You owe Vance nothing!" she snapped. "He's using you to get to Johnny Hunter. From the first he only wanted to use you for this."

"I know. I made the bargain and I intend to go through with it. Why can't you understand, Judith? A deal is a deal."

Her eyes narrowed shrewdly. "I'll call the police. So help me, I'll do it."

"You haven't yet. What good would it do you? They couldn't get here in time to stop me, and if they did there would be somebody to take my place later." I stared her down. "Go to sleep. Get drunk or something."

I had her there. I pushed myself off the couch and she rose with me, still clinging to my sleeve. I glanced at her from the corner of my eye as I reached for my hat on the coffee table. Her face grew tight and lined with grief. She seemed to sense that this small act of hat-lifting was my final refusal.

Then she released my sleeve and her eyes went wide. She lurched toward me suddenly. One of her hands clawed for my face while the other reached for the .45 in my belt. "You won't!" she screeched. "I won't let you!"

The gun was jammed too tightly under my belt for her to reach the trigger. That saved me. Her hand was on the gun butt. She was fumbling to yank it loose when I closed my left hand around her fingers and held them powerless. My head was thrown back to avoid her clawing red nails. I grabbed that hand too.

For a second I stared into her outraged eyes; eyes that had been lovely and warm before this. I muttered "Sorry" and drew my right hand away and swung at her frightened face. She went limp. I caught her as she fell against me and carried her to the couch.

I hovered over her inert form, my eyes drinking up the pale soft beauty of her face, the curves of her lush full-fleshed body. Vance's wife. It wasn't easy to refuse a body like that when it was offered. My chest went tight and I wanted to kiss her. My fingers dug into my sweaty palms. I chewed my underlip.

Suddenly I turned away from her and jammed my hat on over my short brush-cut. I felt as steady as a leaf in a gale. I crossed to the door, took a last look around the silent apartment — Vance's apartment—and hit the light switch. Then I lifted Judith over my shoulder. Downstairs I slid behind the wheel of the grey Buick. Vance's Buick. Judith was still stretched out on the back seat.

Thunder rumbled in the north as I eased the Buick into the westbound traffic. I turned toward the thunder when I reached the Henry Hudson Parkway and ahead of me lightning cut jagged streaks through the black sky. The rain fell as I crossed the city limits. I left the window down. Cool drops of rain slashed in and stung my cheek and I realized I was pushing the Buick too fast. I eased it down to fifty. I wanted to be careful until I reached the cabin, until I paid my debt to Vance.

The last time I tried to kill a man I failed. Only it hadn't been *another* man that time. I got a cigarette to my mouth, fired it with the dash lighter. Lulled by the smoke and the steady hum of the Buick's tires on wet pavement, I tried to grope back, to recapture that black mood, to remember the frame of mind I had been in when all this started . . .

2.

The first day back from the Korean front I had put on my old civvies and looked up the hometown girl. The one who wrote to me, the one who said she would wait.

The one who married the son of a super market owner while I was on the boat coming back.

My wallet was bulging. There came a succession of hotel rooms, each dirtier than the last. And girls, each cheaper than the last. And bottles, until they lost their effect and the wallet was empty. Then the fight with a bartender who wouldn't stake me to one on the house, then running, the shrill scream of a police whistle behind me in the night.

And finally the bridge.

There was a pale moon over the bridge. When I looked up at it, it seemed to laugh, to mock me over the miles of dark empty space. All of a sudden it got to be too much, it was heaped too high.

There was a rapid succession of changing sensations. As I left the bridge I thought I heard a car motor and the angry squeal of brakes. There was a rush of air past my face. Then the water, cold and sudden at first, then a warm, soothing, enveloping blackness. I was through

fighting — until I felt something slink around my chin down there, take a firm hold and start to pull me up.

I thrashed, frightened and choking, my lungs hot. But the man in the water with me soon put an end to it. His fist exploded against my chin and I got a fleeting glimpse of that great black void.

My first realization that I was still alive came when my eyes batted open. Through a wet blur I saw the moon again. It seemed to have that same mocking expression. A spasm shook me then. I rolled over the retched violently and spat and cursed. When my viscera settled down I discovered I was on the lake shore, cold and wet. I looked around and found a face close to mine, a face with heavy cheeks and wet blond hair plastered on its forehead.

He was kneeling beside me, dripping. Between labored breaths he said, "What'd you want to do that for? Young guy like you?"

"None of your damn business!" I gasped. "Who asked you to put your nose in?"

He ran a hand across his mouth. "Maybe . . . maybe it is my business."

I rolled to a sitting position and he walked over to pick up his coat. Half-dazed, drenched, and again defeated I sat there catching my breath and watching him. He was a big man, with broad shoulders and gorilla-size hands. He came back muttering to the night, "Why did I drive down this way tonight instead of taking the highway? Why did I get here just as you tried to knock yourself off?" He looked out over the shimmering lake. "I don't know. But maybe it was what they call fate—doing us both a favor."

I scowled and grunted to let him know what I thought of his cheap philosophy.

He leaned down and helped me to my feet. "C'mon, let's get some dry clothes."

"Sure," I said. "They grow on trees around here."

"At the cabin, punk. It's only a coupla miles back."

"Name is Paul. Paul Miller."

"Yeah, sure, punk. Mine's Vance Jensen. Real fancy, huh?" His mouth opened into a raucous deep laugh and there in the night it sounded like a laughing tuba. I didn't see anything funny.

He led the way to a car pulled over to the side of the dirt road. I got in feeling sulky and tight-lipped. This big buy had just made things tough for me again. Why do you get help when you're beyond it?

He guided the car over the snaky road until a clearing showed itself on the left. The headlights of the car found the log cabin as he wrenched the wheel around and stepped on the brake pedal.

Inside he lit a hurricane lamp and played the good host. He found

large towels and we rubbed ourselves dry in that barely furnished cell in the woods. He threw me some corduroy pants and a shirt and I knew then he was being generous with someone else's equipment. The clothes were almost a perfect fit on me and about nine sizes too small for him. He barely squeezed into the duds he picked for himself. I didn't wonder too much about it. I was just along for the ride.

He offered me a cigarette and his heavy-cheeked face was passive around his small inquiring eyes. I took the cigarette. I said, "I suppose for this you want the whole sad tale of my life?"

"Unh-uh," he grunted, slowly shaking his expressionless face.

It didn't help me, didn't hurt me. I still felt empty. There were safety matches on the wooden chest. I lit my cigarette and waited for him to say something.

He did. "A guy just doesn't do a thing like that, punk. If someone else does it to you, that's different, but you don't do it to yourself." He looked thoughtful now as he scratched his thick neck and paced beside the rough pine bunk. "Why did you?"

Was I to tell him my girl gave me the fast shuffle? He'd laugh. Tell him the booze had worn off and I couldn't buy myself another drink? He'd laugh louder. I shrugged and kept my mouth closed.

"Okay," he snapped. "I don't give a damn about that anyway. I'll give you a reason not to try it again."

"Like what?"

"Like four hundred a week and a place to flop. Clothes, good food, drink. All the good times you can handle. Good-looking women." He smiled at me openly.

"Women!" I gritted, stepping on the cigarette.

"So that's it. A dame!" His tuba laugh blasted again.

There he was laughing at me and I didn't feel like taking a poke at him. I didn't feel like doing anything. It was all the same. Up or down. Left or right. Laugh or cry. All the same. But the offer he made sounded like it might turn into a good deal. It sounded impossible, without sense. A wild whoopee fling at his expense. With that I might forget. I might get to feel better. I might get to feel.

"What's in it for you, Jensen? You don't throw your good money away on a guy like me for nothing. What's the scoop?"

He put his hands on his hips and thrust a big face out at me. It held a stony look. "It's not for nothing, punk. It's a brainstorm that hit me when I saw you going over. You're just the kind of a guy I need. Probably no relatives, nobody who gives much of a damn about you one way or the other, a stranger, a guy nobody will know. There's a job I need done. You live good on my dough until I tell you to do it." He

clamped his teeth hard for a second, then bit off the words. "When I say do it, you do it. No questions asked."

"And when I've done it?"

He shrugged. "You'll get a bonus if it comes off okay and you're on your own again."

"How much?"

He didn't hesitate. "Two thousand."

I searched the rough wall behind him. What did I have to lose? Nothing. The job he'd have lined up for me would be something dirty. It would be the end of the easy life he was offering now. It was both means and end. There was this and there was the lake. I couldn't think any further than that.

"Okay," I said.

He stuck out a big hand. "First time I ever made a deal with a dead man."

That shook me for an instant. But he was right. I took his hand.

3.

Vance drove me into New York, the east eighties. It was quite a place, his apartment, and as soon as I looked around and saw the colors and the delicate little pieces I knew there was a woman's hand in this. He ushered me through the door saying, "This is where you live from now on. That Buick downstairs is yours while you're around, but no long trips, understand. This is one investment I want to pay off."

"I've nowhere to go." I wandered aimlessly around the enormous living room and snorted at the gas-log fireplace. Ersatz homeyness.

Vance picked up the phone near the foyer and dialed. I listened. "Hello, Gus . . . I'm sending a guy down today . . . yeah, name of Paul Miller . . . send me the bill."

He replaced the phone in the cradle and turned to see me watching. "That was my tailor," he said. "You hop down there and get a couple suits for yourself. I don't want nobody around here in rags like you have on."

I guess the four hundred a week and the car and the new suits made him think he could talk to me any damn way he pleased. I noticed it but it didn't bother me. "Where do I sleep?" I asked.

"In here." I followed him out of the room and into another, a bedroom. "Guest room," he explained. "Yours now." He began pointing. "Down there's the kitchen, over there the latrine, next door down there is where I bunk, and we use that one for poker games."

There was another room he hadn't mentioned, at the end of a small passageway, the most distant room from his. I jerked my thumb toward it. "That's the woman's room?"

"Who said there was a woman?" he snapped.

"Nobody. The decorations. The magazines on the table. Women's magazines."

He stared at me until I thought he was trying to bore a hole through my face with his eyes. "You got good vision. I like that," he said. "The room back there is Judy's. That's the one thing you got no part of, the one place you never got a reason to be. Judy's my wife. Great little girl, but she gets funny ideas now and then. You be careful there, punk."

So, I thought, that's the way it is between them.

"Or else what?" I grinned. "You'll kill me?"

He knew that threat was weak. He scowled. He looked menacing. He joined his hands and cracked his knuckles. "No, punk, but I'll make you wish that's what I would do." All expression left his face and he gave me the blankest, most emotionless look I ever saw. Then he was dangerous. But I was here to spend his money, drink his liquor, have myself a hell of a time for a while, and he could use his energy being dangerous to somebody else.

"Suits me," I said. "Great little girls I can do without."

"Yeah." He plucked a wallet from his pants and counted out some bills. The first week's pay. Then he found pencil and paper in a drawer in a small end table and wrote out an address. "That's the tailor. When you get back here some of the other punks will be up for a card game. You can buy in if you want."

"Okay." I shoved the money in my pocket. I went for the door, going out to get the first really expensive suits I'd ever had.

"Remember," he said, "there's no backing out of this deal."

I closed the door and went downstairs.

Weaving and jerking through traffic, jumping the lights, I got the Buick over to the west side and turned downtown. Near the tailor's address I slowed the car and did something I'd always wanted to do. I parked beside a sign that read "No Parking." I got out and walked up to the second floor of a grimy building to see Gus the tailor. I spent a couple of hours up there getting fitted and when I came down there was a ticket on the windshield of the Buick. I smiled. So they were going to fine me. So what? I was in the chips. I scuttled under the wheel and roared away.

Back at Vance's I thought I'd walked into the wrong apartment. It stunk of whiskey and smoke. It seemed more like the back room of a pool parlor. A voice grumbled and cursed and somebody else laughed. A tuba laugh. Vance's laugh. I could hear him say from the other room, "My pot. Lady Luck's no lady for you, Billy."

Somebody said, "Damn!"

I closed the door quietly and walked into the game room.

Around a circular table there were four others besides Vance. They all had glasses at their elbows, their loud ties were pulled away

from unbuttoned collars. Two of them wore hats. Vance looked up as he shuffled the deck. "Back, huh? Like to buy a stack?"

I thought about it, told myself I didn't have to play games with him. "No thanks. Maybe next time."

"Suit yourself," he said. Then to the others, "This is Paul Miller." That was all the explanation necessary. They grunted their hellos at me through the smoke and I grunted back. I stayed long enough to watch Vance's diamond flush get snowed under by Kings-full, then went back into the living room and sat on the couch, thumbing idly through a magazine.

The game broke up after a few more hands. I could spot the losers by the way they grumbled as they came out of the room. Vance wasn't grumbling. He was sliding the knot of his tie up to the collar and saying, "How about a drink at the Parrot Club? On me. I'm on my way over there anyway."

Two of them liked the idea and waited while Vance got into his coat. The others said goodbye and walked out. When Vance was ready he turned to me. "Keep yourself handy," he said.

He herded them out without inviting me along and I knew then how it was going to be as far as the boys were concerned. It was none of their business. And whatever else they did besides play poker wasn't any of my business. I liked the arrangement. I picked up another magazine. Before I could crack it I heard feet scraping somewhere in the apartment. I wasn't alone.

4.

A door slammed and the feet scraped closer, right into the same room with me. I didn't move my head up. I just looked up at her from under my eyebrows. She came in with short, lurching steps and made it to the cabinet bar near the window without falling. She had an empty glass in her hand. A tall glass. She tilted a booze bottle over it until it was half full, held it under the seltzer bottle and squirted in a thimbleful as mixer.

Turning and raising the glass to her lips in one motion, she noticed me for the first time. She brought the glass down quickly and covered it with her other hand, as though she thought I might try to take it away from her.

"Thought everybody was gone," she mumbled through loose red lips between which she presently sloshed some booze. Her eyes focused on me. Large dark eyes. She pushed with red-tipped fingers at her loose, uncombed raven black hair. That face of hers would look good sober. The rest of her—bust ill-concealed under the loose robe, full rounded hips, the soft white patch of leg that showed—wasn't harmed any by drink. It was terrific. Dream-girl stuff. "What are you, mister? Something left over from the poker game?"

"I didn't play."

"Smart." She took a couple of steps toward me. "Don't ever. Vance cheats."

I filed that away in my mind and kept quiet. She came closer and looked down at me with an ugly twist to her mouth. "What's your recommendation?" she asked. "Pocket picking or tea peddling?"

I looked up at her hovering, drunken face. "Neither."

"Why didn't you go out with the rest of them?"

"I'm not one of them," I said evenly, then, "Why don't you get back in your room?"

She flushed clear up to the temples, waited, then said seriously, "Because I hate it. Because I hate this whole place! Now why don't you get out of here before I call the manager and have you thrown out!"

"I like it here," I said, "and in case Vance forgot to mention it to you, I live here now."

"You—!" She gulped again from her glass. "So you're the boarder he brought home. Boarder, my eye!"

I nodded. We remained frozen there for a minute, silently appraising each other. A thought fluttered through my mind, like a curtain in a light breeze. This woman and I weren't such strangers after all. She was doing slowly—with the booze—what I had tried to do in one swift stroke back at the lake. Her eyes told me she was hurt, helpless, trapped.

She broke the silence by draining her glass with one deft tilt, holding it out to me and saying, "How about a drink?"

For a second I wanted to tell her she'd had enough. I shrugged that off and crossed to the bar with her glass. I mixed her one and one for myself. When I carried it back to her I found her draped on the couch with a lot of thigh showing. "Your robe is slipping," I told her.

She gave me a quizzical glance and covered her legs. She said, "How long are you staying—Boarder?"

"I don't know." I sat at the other end of the couch. "Until the job is done."

"What job? What are you here for?" she asked. Her eyes in that instant seemed afraid and sober.

"Don't know that, either," I said, taking my eyes off her and sipping my highball.

She got up when I reached for the magazine and moved away from the couch slowly, carefully, as though it was *me* she was afraid of. At the little bar she snatched a bottle by the neck and tripped toward her room. Before she left me, she said, "Better leave yourself while you're still able—Boarder."

I didn't bother answering. It could have been just a piece of advice or it could have been a warning. Before she disappeared into the hall that led to her room she tilted her head and flashed her eyes at me with a look that seemed to say:

you'll be seeing me again and again. I found myself wishing she hadn't given me that look and it bothered me because I wasn't supposed to care. I was Paul Miller, the man who had been burned once, the man who didn't give a damn, the man without a future. I put my glass to my lips and forgot it.

At that moment I heard a key scrape in the lock and the door to the apartment flew open. I looked around to find Vance standing there. He closed the door and walked in. He halted momentarily, glanced at me, looked in the direction of *her* room, then back at me. He scratched his chin. "Forgot my car keys," he said.

I watched him go into the game room and come out again. There was a look of bafflement and wonder on his face.

"Surprised?" I said.

He glared at me. "Walk easy, punk. Easy. There's no guarantee goes with this deal."

He went out again. Besides being dangerous he fancied himself a really clever guy. I smiled at the closing door.

The next two weeks were a slice of life a lot of guys secretly ache for. What you might call riotous weeks. I didn't get drunk but I always had enough booze in me to keep me from remembering too many things, enough to keep a haze between myself and reality. I slept during the day and lived at night. I spent Vance Jensen's money on good food, good drink, and women who would give nothing but sell anything and who left me wanting to spit on them.

I saw Judith almost every day and we talked casual talk for a few minutes at a time. I learned she was singing at the Parrot Club, Vance's joint, as well as pretending she was an ever-loving wife. Her drinking tapered off and some color crept back into her cheeks and I came to know—without any demonstration—that she wouldn't leave me. feeling the way I felt after a crazy bout with one of the others.

Then it set in. Monotony. Boredom. A nervous, twitching impatience.

I dropped around to the Parrot Club one night, about eleven, to see Vance. As I pushed into the place a wave of applause was rippling through the dive. I looked across the floor and saw Judith bowing and backing away from the tables, smiling into the baby spot. I strolled beyond the crowded, smoky bar and rapped on the Manager sign.

Vance let me in. "Oh, it's you." He went back to an open ledger on his desk, made a scrawl, then said, "What is it you want? Run out of dough?"

I flung my fedora into a chair, planted my palms on his desk and looked down at him. I said, "When does it come off?"

He leaned back with a grin, showing neat large teeth. "When does what come off?"

"The job, whatever it is. Let's get it done!"

"Got a burr in your pants, punk?" His smile disappeared. "Take it easy. You're having a hell of a time. Enjoy it."

"Enjoy it he says! I'm getting tired of booze and cheap women! I want to get this over with before I get sick!"

He rubbed his hands together. "Good, good. You're getting to hate people, you're ready to damn the world! That'll make your job easier to do. I like that."

I collapsed myself into a chair facing him. "Yeah, but when?"

"Soon, I think. Very soon. Just sit tight till I tell you to move." His face settled into that utterly blank, emotionless expression again. "You're not thinking of taking a walk-out, are you?"

"I'm not walking," I insisted. "We made a bargain. I've never walked out on a bargain in my life, and I won't start now. Getting restless, that's all."

"Simmer down. It won't be long."

"Yeah." I got up and started for the door. It swung open before I reached it and Judith came in rubbing her forehead. She glanced at me and slowly approached the desk. She told Vance, "I can't do the late show tonight. This headache is killing me."

He scowled up at her, ran a hand over his blond head in exasperation. "That's just great. What am I supposed to do, sing to them myself!"

"I can't help it, Vance. If I go out there again I think I'll faint."

"All right, all right. I'll put Myra on in your spot. She'll love it."

"I know she will," Judith said. "I'll tell her while I'm changing."

Vance scratched his chin and turned to me. "Take Judy home. See she gets an aspirin." His eyes swung between us, from her face to mine and back again. "And no stops on the way. Go to sleep."

And right then, all of a sudden, I wanted to smash his nose in. What did he think he was? Her jailer? I held the door for her. "I'll wait for you. Car's out front."

5.

It didn't take her long to change. Within ten minutes we were rolling through the uptown traffic. I looked at her when she lit a cigarette. That little headache-born frown she wore in Vance's office was gone. She inhaled smoke and let it squirt out her nostrils.

"How's the headache?" I asked.

"Gone," she smiled. "Why is it, Paul, that you never say much more than hello to me? Do I have leprosy?"

"So that's it."

"Yes, that's it."

I stopped for a red light and stared at her. "What's so special about you?"

If the jibe hurt, she didn't show it. She talked on. "Nothing, I guess. Why do you talk like that. I can see you're not really as tough as you

like me to think—" She paused. "—just as you know I'm not the lush I seemed to be when we first met."

"Do I know it?"

She turned on the car seat, put her legs under her. "Be a friend, Paul. Is that too much to ask?"

"Cut it out!" I rapped.

The light changed. I put the Buick in gear and rolled. I felt my palms sweat on the wheel and it wasn't the weather. There was a big gulf between us and I wanted it to stay there.

She blew a spear of smoke out the car window. "Sorry, Paul. It's just—I need someone once in a while when it gets rough."

"What do I look like? A boy scout?"

She ignored that. "Help me, Paul, and I'll get you enough money to last you the rest of your life."

The rest of my life! My mirthless laugh spilled harshly between us. The first laugh I'd had in months.

"Are you that hopeless!" she said. She flicked her cigarette into the slipstream and came back at me again. "I'm serious about this. The Parrot Club and a couple of other places are in my name, actually are mine. Vance gave them to me for a wedding present. I could get a lot of money for them, even selling cheap."

I was about to snap at her again but let it go. This was our block. I slid the Buick to a stop beside another car and backed into a space in front of the apartment house. I went around to the sidewalk side and opened her door for her. Damned if I know why. Maybe a hold-over from early training. We went up in silence.

A tear rolled down her cheek. It might have been an act. I didn't know. "Look, Judith, I'm sorry you have these troubles. We all have troubles. I can't do anything for you. I stopped asking for help some time ago—and stopped giving it!"

I got up. I didn't want to watch her face fall apart. As I left the room her racked sobs pecked at the back of my neck. In my room I pulled off my clothes and went in to shower. There was a cool spray over my head and back as I thought about Judith. The way it was, she'd be better off making the best of her bum deal with Vance Jensen. She was beaten from the start. The trouble was, she had me upset. And I'd thought I was beyond upsetting.

6.

The next evening came. I was pacing the living room with a cigarette, feeling fidgety and Vance was at the coffee table cheating himself at solitaire. Every now and then he glanced toward Judith's room and I looked out at the darkening sky.

The door chimes rang and Vance got up. At the door he stood without admitting his caller, but I heard the message. "Hunter's back.

Vance shut the door and stomped into his room. When he came out

he had a Colt .45 in one hand and a box of ammunition in the other. He slapped the ammo box on the table and tossed the .45 at me. I grabbed it.

I took a quick look at the clip. Two slugs. I shoved it back. Vance put on his hat and said, "This is it. I'll be out with my alibi and you'll be doing your job."

He watched me carefully to see if I was going to chicken out. "Any questions, punk?"

One long step brought me up close to him, close enough to jam the nose of the .45 into his belly and watch his skin blanch. I gritted my teeth. "The name is Paul. I'm sick of this 'punk' business. Say it once —Paul."

His eyes rolled toward the gun in his belly. "Yeah, sure—Paul."

"That's all," I said.

He gave me his blank look, then he sprang his surprise.

"You're only going to pretend it's Hunter you're after," he said.

"I don't get it."

"Easy. Hunter was the bait. I knew he'd be back and last night did it, that fake headache."

My mind whirled. I'd fought off my desire for Judith and cooled myself off with the shower. It must have been while I was in my room Judith had slipped off to see Hunter; what if I'd gone into her room, after all . . . she'd have been gone. The laugh would have been on me.

"You don't think it's just Hunter, do you?" Vance scowled. "It's anything in pants that looks good to her! I was glad to see you didn't fall for her." He started to poke his finger into my gut then thought better of it. "You're to get *her*."

My mouth must have fallen open. Vance nodded. "It's the only way I can get rid of her. I thought maybe if I kept a watch on her she'd come out of it, but when Hunter came back that was it. Tell her you're going after him. She'll try to talk you out of it. Pretend you're taking her to him, then . . . you know what to do."

He went out and I stared at the door. I'd thought it was Johnny Hunter, and he'd let me think so. He'd wanted to see if I'd play around with her myself.

Thunder was still stumbling across the sky when I turned the Buick off the wet highway and onto the narrow, rutted road that led to the entrance of the Motel.

Easing out of the seat, I turned up my coat collar and hunched my shoulders against the cold rain. My legs were stiff from the uninterrupted ride. I sloshed through the mud toward the cabin marked "Office." I hoped there was an empty cabin at this late hour. I had to walk with my head down to keep the slashing rain out of my eyes.

I didn't think twice what Vance would do if he knew I had finally doublecrossed him. I hadn't gone to the cabin, but had kept on driving

beyond the place where Hunter was waiting for Judith, and now she and I were irrevocally bound together. There was one empty cabin, "for me and my wife."

I went back to the Buick, eased it up to the entrance of #6, set in a semi-circle of trees. The attendant in a dark green slicker dashed away from my headlights as he came from some last-minute straightening of the cabin. I waited for the yellow light of the Office to shut off, and then I carried Judith into the cabin and tossed her on the bed. She moaned and lay still.

On the way up here I suppose I could have killed her and dumped the body, but killing a woman was something new. I needed time to get used to the idea.

I removed my wet clothes and was climbing into my side of the double bed when Judith stirred again, suddenly lifted herself up and said: "Where's Johnny?"

"This isn't Vance's cabin," I told her. "We're at a motel."

"Oh." She slid her black olive eyes toward me and fell back again motionless.

I reached over and switched off the table lamp, and closed my eyes hoping that I wouldn't have to think. I'd gone into a semi-conscious state just before falling asleep when I gradually became aware of an arm encircling me and Judith's face was pressed against my chest. She snuggled up to me and I felt her warm flesh against my own.

7.

In the morning the air was clear. I could feel a coolness on my face as I lay quietly on my back. I knew I had been right to rescue Judith from Vance. It didn't matter now; we could keep on driving away from the city, perhaps to Canada. He'd wanted me to kill her; well, so far as he was concerned she'd be dead.

I turned toward her, but her side of the bed was empty. The cover was rumpled and the pillow had a hollow dent where her head had been. The mountain air must have awakened her and she had had plenty of sleep during the drive up here. I closed my eyes for a moment and then decided it was time for me to get up, too. I felt hungry.

Washing and dressing quickly, I stepped out into the air. The Buick gleamed with the rainwash. Beyond was a building next to the Office marked "Diner." Judith must be having breakfast as she was nowhere else in sight. The other occupants of the cabins must have had an even earlier start because there were no other cars outside the cabins now.

I walked across the pine-needled path to the Diner and looked in through the large window. Judith was at the far end of the long counter. The fellow behind the counter was taking away some dishes and as he turned his back I saw Judith open her purse and take out a flask, pour what looked

like whiskey into her coffee cup. She drank it quickly.

Worried, I went to the entrance and opened the screen door but didn't go in. I heard her say to the young man: "So I can't help you do the dishes? Well, can I help you with anything else?" There was a fierce undermeaning in her tone. He laughed nervously.

I could see his face from where I stood but I couldn't see Judith. There was a red stain creeping up his handsome features. Anything in pants, Vance had said.

"Since you're all alone," Judith said, "nobody would know if I lent a hand."

I opened the screen and stamped in.

"Oh, you're up at last," Judith said brightly without any sign of dismay at my presence. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry," I said abruptly.

"You should be," she said too softly.

There was something stuck in my throat and I couldn't eat even if I'd wanted to.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go."

She clamped her purse together and then opened it again.

"Oh, wait. First I want to tip this young man." She brought a coin out of her bag and stretched her arm across the counter so that she could put it directly into his hand. I pretended to look away but I saw her give his palm a tweak before she withdrew her arm.

"Where are we going?" she asked, joining me. She lurched slightly and I knew she had had more than one shot from her purse flash.

"I'm taking you to Johnny Hunter. That's where you want to go, isn't it?"

"What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

Without answering I climbed into the car and let her help herself into the seat from the other side.

I kept my lips locked together, paying no attention to her chatter. Vance was right. She needed killing. She was a lush.

"You're going too fast!" she complained. I was hitting close to eighty.

"If you don't like it. . . ." I reached over suddenly to her door handle. "Get out!" I pushed with all my might, the car swerved, and I righted it with one hand, grabbed at the open door with the other, and in my turned position I could see her body bounce off the road against a boulder, shattering. Quickly I dragged the door to, and grabbed the wheel with both hands. With my foot off the gas, the Buick had slowed down some, but now I put on speed again. I'd paid my debt to Vance. My debt, I thought, with a bitter swallow. Ha! I was a bigger bum than I'd been when Vance rescued me from the river. I hadn't paid my debt, I'd compounded it last night . . .

All I could do was keep driving . . . to Canada maybe.

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